

# you're my light (but are you the end of this tunnel, or just the train?)

**By: featherx**

She's not good with people, or school, or social interaction of any kind. A black-haired reporter swoops into her life and turns everything upside-down. Maybe she'll turn out okay in the end. Or maybe not.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2014-11-28

Updated: 2015-01-25

Words: 31103

Chapters: 8

Original source: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/2684750>

Exported with the assistance of [FicHub.net](https://FicHub.net)

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tunnel, or just the train?)**

Introduction

this dreamscape that i walk through  
these words that poison my veins  
you are so much more than what i deserve  
someday, i'll see everything with you  
just want to be something, a name you call  
my heartbeat slows to match yours  
when we both fall down and don't hit the bottom  
every single hope you and i had shattered

# this dreamscape that i walk through

## Chapter 1: this dreamscape that i walk through

She opens the door by a smidgen. Closes it. Opens it again. Closes it. Again.

She sinks down to the floor on her knees, forehead against the door, brown eyes staring at the floor blankly.

It's the first day of school. No - *real* school. Her mother stopped hiring teachers to home-school her and decided it was about time for her to start attending real high school. Or as real as high school can get. She knows it's only a matter of time before she starts shutting herself in again, hiding behind the public with a simple yellow cellphone. It's happened once. She doubts it won't happen again.

But the days in between the start and the eventual end scare her. They frighten her. She can't talk to others. Not vague signals. Not even nodding or shaking her head. Eye contact is a devil sent from hell to haunt her. When the first - '*and last*' - day of kindergarten ended, she thought that people were all nuisances you were required to speak with to get higher up in success. She still thinks so.

But she has to do this. She has to. If only to make her mother happy, if only to make her stop drinking, stop taking all those drugs she *knows* are horrid for her health. Maybe if she does good, her mother will be happy, and then she'll stop...

She stands up, knees knocking together as she opens the door.

She closes it behind her, this time.

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The school is only a five-minute's walk from her house. No problem. She totters on the street, taking care not to bump against anyone or look up from the pavement at all. She sticks to the very edge of the

street, deep in the shadows where no one will see her, and eventually finds herself staring up at the large building.

She steels herself, checks to make sure everything is with her and everything she'll need can be quickly taken, and makes unsteady steps towards the gates.

There is a field, first. There are other students, too - several that she doesn't recognize from anywhere, not even with her cellphone. Hesitantly, she brings it out from her blouse pocket and flips it on, looking around to see if any of these people were in any sort of website she could gather information from.

Except for Facebook. She hates Facebook.

All the results lead back to Facebook, as she mostly expected. She snaps the screen shut and pockets the yellow checkered flip-phone back. No use stalling around now, she supposes. She'll have to get this done and over with to make sure she can survive for at least one day. When she gets back home, she promises herself she'll deal with even that stupid blue-white website to be prepared for anything the students might throw at her.

She gets a map. Her locker combination. A handbook, or some sort. Some books she missed out. Nothing special. Her locker number is 193, combination 8-9-2-6. There are two other lockers flanking her, she notices - the one on her left is a short, blue-haired pigtailed girl, and the one on her right has silver hair and looks a little like a dog, though she's not sure why. They seem to know each other well, and are happy their lockers are near each other, and chatter to each other cheerily behind her. She makes sure to listen in - vital information may be present there.

She learns their names are Nitori - the blue-haired one - and Momiji - the silver-haired one. Nitori's a little shy - Momiji's a little obedient. They're okay. They don't seem the type to be bothersome. She does find them a little annoying, though, talking behind her back like that, even though it's not technically in the way that's looked down upon. It

still irks her somewhat, but she tries to ignore it as best as she can. Anyway, it doesn't concern her. She can tolerate it.

Her first class - after homeroom, anyway - is History. She loves history - she can do this. Just take notes and listen to the teacher without looking up or reciting. She can do that. This is okay. This is fine.

Please let it be fine.

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Homeroom is strange.

She finds a seat at the very back row of the classroom, where most of the shadows gather and everyone ignores her. The nearest person is at least two seats away. This is perfect. She'll do fine. She hopes. If she hunkers down and doesn't gather attention, then everything will be okay. She'll get good grades. She always gets good grades. Just maybe not socially.

The homeroom teacher talks and talks about rules and regulations that need to be adhered to. She's fine. Though she's already read all of this in the handbook they gave her, she listens again anyway, just to make sure she won't violate any rules and get suspended. Or something. She's still not entirely sure how the school system works. She adds another thing on her list of things-to-do-once-she-gets-home; read the whole handbook. Preferably at least thrice, so she can get a good idea on how these sorts of things go.

Everything goes fine. Well, everything was going fine.

"Everyone, listen up. There's a new addition to the grading system now. Remember all those clubs you had to join and sit in a chair for an hour or two while counting down the minutes until the bell?"

Everyone - or mostly everyone - laughs or groans. Some did both. She's not sure how they did that, but she supposes that everyone in high school can do something like that.

"Guess what, joining these clubs actually gets you some extra credit points now! Cheer, guys. Cheer. This is great. Sort of. Joining a club gets you extra points in a certain subject, usually the one it's associated with. English clubs net you free points in English, so on and so forth. Of course, you do have to actually participate in the club - the president will take note of that. I'll give you all ten minutes to start advertising for your clubs, so go ahead!"

Almost immediately, the whole class erupts into chaos - students are flying this way and that, shoving flyers into others' faces and babbling excitedly about what their club is about. She flinches at the initial noise, but eventually relaxes when she realizes that nobody's going near her. This is alright, then - she doesn't need to join a club. Extra points would be good, but she would really rather not force herself to talk to others for some points in a subject she'd already be good in.

She flips her phone open. Three minutes have gone by. Seven more. If she can handle the ruckus for seven more minutes, she'll be fine. Sixty multiplied by seven. Four-hundred-twenty. Four-hundred-twenty seconds to go. Four-hundred-twenty multiplied by -

"A *flip-phone*? Man, get an iPhone. Those are so old."

She almost looks up. Almost. Instead, she shuts her phone and shoves it back in her pocket.

"Did you *heaaar* me? Hello, hello?" A hand waves in front of her face. Brown eyes blink in mild surprise, but she doesn't react. "Well, fine. I guess you can be that way. But at least you're not blind, right? Here!" The hand withdraws from her sight, but reappears a moment later with a flyer in hand. It's some sort of advertisement for the Newspaper Club.... What?

"Ta-da! The Newspaper Club! We handle the bimonthly paper that reports on all major incidents happening 'round campus. If you wanna join, or at least try out, all the details are in there." A finger, rough and callused, points at a block of text near the end of the

paper. She can spy the name of a room and some dates, presumably dates for an audition. "Okay, then, um..."

The voice trails off, but the hand doesn't go away. She almost wants to look up, because the voice sounds like she's finished her speech, but then she isn't moving at all. Brown eyes flicker, her mouth opens - no. She closes it. Gently, shakily, she pushes the hand away and accepts the flyer, folding it neatly and placing it in her bag. (She pretends the momentary skin-to-skin contact doesn't send an electric current through her arm and spreads throughout her whole body.) When she looks back, the hand is still on her table.

"... Not gonna tell me your name...?" the voice asks. She blanches - she doesn't like telling her name to others now. It used to be something she was proud of. Not anymore. "Well, I'll tell you mine. Name's Aya. Aya Shameimaru - heard of me?"

The normal response would be a nod or a shake of the head. The only thing she does is shrink into her seat even more. Too much conversation - even if it was completely one-sided - made her a nervous, horrid wreck. The voice starts up again; "Guess not. Well, really, I'm begging ya - join the Newspaper Club, aight? I can't be the only one in the club. I'm good, I know, but I ain't *that* good at keeping a major club doing major stuff up all by myself. And hey! You know, you look like a girl who knows what she does. I'm about a hundred and twelve percent sure you can help out a whole lot. So join that club and I'll make sure you won't regret it!"

(There is something about this Aya's voice that makes her tremble. She's not sure whether it's from fright or something else.)

The hand disappears from her table. She almost misses it, but realizes she's not supposed to do that. She shouldn't get attached. She never gets attached, anyway. Aya Shameimaru is only another background character to ignore, to pass along the corridor - and eventually, the road to life - and never look back at, never smile at, never say 'hi' to. She is nothing, and never will be a something.

... is what she hopes, but her brown eyes are feeling moist and she doesn't know why.

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*Music Room 2 - September 4, 5:30 sharp. Don't miss it!*

She's checked. She's absolutely sure she knows what she's doing it. She's gone through thirty-six and a half pages on Google, read every single post on every single timeline on every single Facebook account. She told her mother she'd come back home as early as she can, but she wasn't making any promises. She is totally, absolutely ready for what she is about to do.

But her legs are wobbling, brown eyes flickering, hands restless as they find something to do besides clutch the near-torn flyer. In the past five minutes, she has stood in front of the music room. In the past five minutes, her hands have adjusted her brunette pigtailed three times. Right now, she's on her fourth.

She ties the purple ribbon so tight around her hair she feels almost constricted by her own accessory. Breathing out a deep sigh (of what, she's not sure - fear? Excitement? She hopes it's not anything she's thinking of), she turns the doorknob and pushes the door open with the softest of clicks.

She enters. *Clack. Clack.*

The music room is unremarkable. There are some tables, a large bulletin board with papers - most of them outdated, she notices - pinned to it, and most notably, large amounts of papers scattered everywhere. Some are in boxes piled up in the corner, some in neat, tied stacks, but most were strewn about in the room, giving the entire place a very messy look. It made her expectations drop terrifyingly low.

In the center of it all sits a student with short black hair, a curious red-white accessory pinning her bangs back, dressed in a black-white outfit, and scribbling on a piece of paper furiously. Her eyes -



*red, ruby red, so, so pretty* - are focused entirely on the matter at hand, completely concentrated on that single scrap of paper. She almost admires the determination, but realizes that she ultimately just isn't fit for this club. She doesn't have the same drive, the same motivation this girl has, and she's horrible at trying to do such.

She moves to turn away. It's only when she's halfway back to the door that the girl's head snaps upwards.

She barely manages to catch sight of the most distinctive feature of the girl - *her eyes* - before her body slams itself against the door and cowers at the attention. She can't see, can't hear, *can't breathe* - those eyes on her pitiful, pathetic form, she doesn't deserve it, *no* -

"Whoa, whoa, hey! Are you alright?"

She thinks she can hear something scraping against wood. Probably a chair or some sort, but she honestly can't think straight anymore. The only thing that she can see is *eyes on me, eyes on my arms, eyes on my legs, eyes everywhere, it hurts it hurts it hurts* - she can't stop -

There is the lightest of touches on her shoulder. A finger. Rough. Calloused. A finger from a hand from a table -

She jerks back, stumbling over herself to get away from the contact. She hates it. *Hates it hates it hates it*. But she doesn't feel the initial reaction she usually gets, not the disgust, the hatred, the fear - no, she gets *longing* .

Her back bumps against a thin, wooden thing. It's most probably the leg of a table. Her eyes are stinging from being shut so tightly for such a long time, but she can barely care anymore. *Why? Why? Why? Why? I hate it! I hate it, I hate it, I hate it hate it hate it why do I want it?*

"Hey... hey, there, calm down. Calm down. It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you, I promise. Really."

The voice soothes her. Calms her, even, like the voice promises. But she can't *bear* the thought of being comforted by a mere *voice*, when the very thing she has feared for nearly her whole life has been human interaction. She can't take this. She can't. She *can't*. Why did she ever think she could do this? It's all a mistake. All of it. Stepping foot in the school campus and thinking she could last without having an attack was the worst mistake she had ever committed.

But she can feel it; her hackles lowering, her eyes blinking back tears, hands trembling instead of numb. She can feel the life drifting back down into her body. Her *broken* body - no. She stops. Shivers. But she doesn't cry.

She's learned a long time ago that crying didn't solve anything and never would.

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Aya is, without a doubt, completely confused.

A girl she recognizes from her homeroom class steps in the club room and tries to exit when Aya sees her. She then promptly breaks down and looks like she's having a panic attack. The black-haired reporter had thought she should call an ambulance, or 911, or *something*, but all she did was go near the brunette girl and try to say *hey, it's okay, even though you probably don't know me and don't care either*. Ridiculous.

Still, it looks like the girl had calmed down enough to stop shaking and making strange whimpering noises. Honestly, that had scared Aya. It was a little unnerving to watch someone break down into pieces right before one's eyes, more so for her, as she's never actually seen anything like that.

Deciding it's probably safe enough to approach her, she asks, "Are you okay now?"

The girl trembles in response, but doesn't move or say anything to confirm or deny the question. Aya frowns. Wasn't this the girl who

refused to say anything when she talked to her about joining the Newspaper Club?

"Hey, it's alright. Nothing's going to happen to you, okay? I'll, uh, protect you!"

That was really, really stupid, Aya thinks, but the brunette seems to take it very personally.

She had been curled up into a fetal position, legs to chest and face hidden by her knees, but when she hears that, she slowly uncurls until about half of her face is showing. They're brown, red-rimmed, and have a dark cloud of uncertainty and fear in them. But she doesn't say anything. Instead, her eyes do the talking for her. Aya can almost hear the word - *"Really?"*

"Y-Yeah, really! I promise, I won't let you be scared by anything again, alright? Just, uh, stick to me for a little. I won't hurt you, and I'll make sure nobody else will!"

This was a trap. A really, really clever trap, to be honest. Aya hopes the girl doesn't really believe her. However, the brunette lowers her face just a tiny bit, so only her brown eyes are shown among chocolate strands of hair. *"I don't trust you. Who'll say you'll keep that promise?"*

Though she's grasping at straws by this point, Aya tries hard - really, she does - to respond properly to the unspoken question. "I promise I'll keep my promise. And I promise I'll keep that promise that promised to protect you." She cracks a grin, in an effort to lighten the mood. Humor always works with these kinds of things, right? "I don't know what you're scared of... but it'll be just fine! Really, everything works out okay in the end, after all."

Instead of having the intended effect, the brunette's face only sinks lower and lower until nothing but her head remains above her knees. Aya tries in vain to keep her eyes from sinking lower. Without the girl's eyes to guide her, she can't find anything to say.

"... Nice panties," is what she blurts out thirty seconds in the silence.

Instantly, the girl's head shoots up, coloring a furious red incredibly quick. Her eyes are wide, surprised - "*What?!* "

"I mean, they're checkered, purple and white and black too, I think," Aya stammers, trying to back away from the brunette. "Uh, maybe wear some shorts... hu-"

The brunette does a pretty good job at covering it up, though, because she's standing up, still flushed red, and speeds out of the room with impressive stilt-walking. Aya almost laughs, but notices that what she'd said was really stupid and yeah, she should probably apologize.

Coughing back a snicker at the brunette's enraged look, she lays her hand atop the girl's shoulder. She realizes a second later that *oh crap, that wasn't a good move*, but sees that the brunette doesn't even notice it. Her brown eyes are staring daggers at Aya, but they're not the really angry kind, more like she's holding daggers and she's ready to let them fly. "*What?* "

"Um, sorry about that," Aya says, laughing nervously. She slowly, excruciatingly removes her hand from the brunette's shoulder, and blinks in surprise when the girl's eyes momentarily flicker with some sort of emotion she can't place. "I mean, I couldn't think of what to say. I guess it just... got out?"

"*The only thing that's going to be going out is me,* " is what the reporter can imagine she'd say, when she turns on her heel and stalks back out of the room. She slams the door shut, but Aya's only charmed further.

'*I said I'd protect her, didn't I?* ' she muses, a little disturbed as she walks back to her work table. '*I hope she doesn't remember that... I don't think I'm ever going to meet her again, anyway.* '

... '*I never got her name!* '

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She's sure it had been a dream. A very, very realistic dream, and at the same time a very *un* realistic one, too, but a dream.

She knows it isn't. She's just trying to fool herself that it is.

She walks back home, subconsciously pushing her skirt down every time she felt a draft, and makes sure there isn't anyone else on the road. There isn't, but she holds it down even then. It's embarrassing that she let some unknown girl see her underwear, but she supposes that she wasn't really thinking in the heat of the moment. And during an attack, too...

Her foot catches a pebble and she trips, but she steadies herself and continues walking on and pretending nothing happened. If even her thoughts were distracting her from the outside, then she's definitely going to have to research more. She can't *think*. She has to *know*. Before she knows it, she's flipped out her phone and scrolling through the news feed on Facebook.

Aya Shameimaru is the president of the Newspaper Club and is the only one in it. She writes, edits, prints, and distributes out everything by herself because she doesn't have anyone else to do it. Her major strength is her speed, which is how she manages to get everything done so quickly. She's social, but she doesn't have very many friends due to her gossipy nature.

'... *Gossipy nature?* ' It certainly didn't seem that way just a few minutes ago, when the reporter had promised to protect her from anything that might frighten her. In fact, she had been honestly very caring and kind. It almost scared her, because nobody's ever been that nice to her in any period of time in her life. She can't remember the last time she smiled.

If she really is a gossipy sort of person who cared little for others' personal lives, she's sure Aya would write an entry about her having a panic attack in the music room for some reason. That, or she

would write about the color of her panties. Or both. Most probably both.

But she could feel that Aya really isn't that sort of person, no matter how much she tried to imagine it. She *could*, theoretically, write an entry about that, but she'd have no proof to back it up. The only people who had witnessed the incident firsthand had been her and Aya, and the reporter hadn't taken a picture or anything. And it wasn't like she seemed like a very reliable source of information. Still...

Violet heels clack down the street as she speeds down the road, intent on preparing for the next day.

# these words that poison my veins

Chapter 2: these words that poison my veins

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Aya partially screws up. Hatate runs.

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alternate chapter title: your lips and the noxious words they form

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She's the first one in homeroom class that day. She's not surprised.

She's memorized the students in her class so they won't be a nuisance to her when she needs something. In her usual seat, she brings out a notepad and a pen - her favorite, too, dark purple ink that looks almost black that it fools *all* the teachers - and gets ready. She breathes as steadily as she can, because she doesn't think she can last for very long.

Her eyes lock onto a desk she's sure belongs to nobody else's but one certain person. Tearing out a piece of paper from the pad, she scribbles a few words on it, then places it on her table. A roll of tape and some unsteady steps later, the paper has been successfully taped atop Aya's table.

She breathes out a shaky sigh. She's not used to such things. She wishes she was back to being homeschooled, when the only thing she had to worry about was grades and whether she was too quiet or not. She wishes she stayed at home when she had the chance.

A few minutes go by. People start trickling in. Her phone says it's seven minutes before the bell when a figure dressed in black and white stumbles in class, looking quite beaten up. She spots a flash of red before the door closes behind Aya's bruised form.

None of her classmates stare or react at all, except for a few amused glances. Aya doesn't even look bothered by the fact that she's covered head-to-toe in injuries that certainly look like they hurt. Instead, all she does is laugh it off, rub the back of her head sheepishly, then skip off to sit down on her table -

She stiffens.

She waits.

... But nothing happens.

Brown eyes blinking in confusion, she hunkers down to be as unnoticeable as possible, pretending to fiddle with her phone, as she stares curiously at Aya's general direction. From this angle, she could see the reporter's table... the reporter's *empty* table. And Aya is holding nothing in her hands, or showed any expression that she had seen something that wasn't normally there...

Something is wrong, she can see that. *'Did it fly away? Did I not tape it enough? Is it on someone else's table? No, no, no, this can't be happening... '*

"Huh, Aya, did anything interesting happen yesterday?"

A childish voice. Blue pigtails. Green backpack.

Nitori Kawashiro.

A paper flutters slightly in her hands.

Her vision goes blank.

"Eh? Ah? N-Noo, nothing much..."

"Ehh? Really now?" A smirk. An elbow to the side. "Then what's this note doing on your table?"

*'No. No. No. '*



"Huh? What's that... ah..."

"So something did happen! Whoa! Aya, tell me, tell me! It must be real good to have you all speechless like that!"

"Geh... fine, you got me! Here, here, I'll tell you..."

Before she knows it, she's standing up, chair legs scraping against the wooden floor. Her phone says two minutes to bell. That's fine. It's not like it matters anymore.

Her heels clack on the ground. The door to her class slams behind her. And in her mindless rage, she finds herself curled up on top of a closed toilet, burying her face in her arms and wishing she could go back to when she was in her mother's womb so she could have killed herself with her own hands.

She hates Aya. She hates Nitori. She hates her mother. She hates herself. She hates what she's become. She hates Hatate Himekaidou.

She hates it.

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Brown eyes flicker open. There's a sound. It's disruptive. It's a knock.

It's repetitive knocks on the door to her stall.

She almost shrieks. But she can't stop the horrified cry that tears from her mouth as she stumbles backwards, almost hitting her head on the back of the toilet and possibly cracking her skull. She does, however, end up with half of her body pressed against the wall and the other half standing on the toilet lid. It's a very compromising situation.

There is a simultaneous yelp from the other side - whoever was knocking - and she can spot red heels through the little space under

the door. She only knows one person who wears red heels like those. 'Aya? '

"U-Uh, is this you? Brown-pigtails-girl?"

That voice.

The voice that betrayed her completely.

Her hands tremble as they curl themselves into fists. She steps down from the toilet lid slowly until she's standing on the cool metal floor normally. Her brown eyes are so dark they're almost black.

(Like my soul, she thinks.)

"It's, um. It's lunchtime. Uh... wanna eat with me? Promise, I'll tell you everything. It really isn't what it sounded like, back in homeroom."

*Promise.* God, how she hates that word now. It fills her with such malice and dripping venom that she can't contain herself when she slams her fist against the door. It barely even twitches at her pound, but she can't bring herself to care. She pretends the door is Aya's face, pretends it's the word *promise* staring right at her, and her hand is numbing from the number of punches she's applied to it already.

"What - What're you doing?! Hey, Hatate - !"

She knows her name.

*She knows her name.*

This is cruel. This is just too much. How does she know? How did she even find out? She wants to cry, and scream, and sob until everything is done and everything is okay. *Like she promised.* God, Aya said she'd protect her. She said, she *promised* . But she can see it was a lie, like everything else in her life.

Idly, she wonders why she's not surprised. Her fist makes contact with the door again.

She raises it. Prepares to rush it forward again for a new punch against the abused door (*before she realizes her hand is the one bruised and bleeding*). Then she lowers it because *this isn't her*.

She's sunk into the pits of despair before, but she's never done anything like beat her fist against a solid wall again and again until she can't feel the pain and anger. She didn't cry either, or wish so bad to stab something in her chest and neck and eyes so she didn't have to suffer like this anymore.

This isn't her.

(What is this ruby-eyed girl doing to her?)

Aya seems to sense the pseudo-calm that begins to enfold her, because she speaks up again, slowly, softly, like a feathery touch. (Like her hand.) "Are you okay?" A pause. "No, of course not... I mean... will you be okay? At least... for a little while?"

Brown eyes flicker. She's not sure with what, but she knows it's not fear, or exasperation, or despair.

No. It's more of *I'm not okay, but I'll be okay for you*.

She flicks the lock off the door, then pushes it open. Aya, short black hair and wide ruby eyes, stares at her bedraggled figure.

She doesn't collapse into Aya's waiting arms or anything stupid like that. She doesn't even smile. But she's sure her eyes say *something* to the reporter, because Aya tentatively reaches out for the brunette's hand.

She brushes most of it away, leaving their pinkies to interlock. That's as far as she'll allow.

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"What I said, in homeroom - it wasn't about what happened yesterday, between the two of us. I made up some weird story involving Reimu and Marisa, but I swear, that's it. I didn't mention you at all, promise!"

Aya blanches under the hard gaze the brunette - *Hatate* - gives her. Now that she thinks of it, while brown eyes aren't anything special, hers are definitely something else. These don't just convey emotions - they convey events, words, sentences, *everything* that Aya would ever need to know if she ever talks to her. It's almost unsettling how much the girl gives away with a single glance.

And the name *Hatate* sends shivers down her spine. It's not the kind of name one normally hears, unlike *Aya*, which can be found everywhere and anywhere. But *Hatate*... it's not weird. Just... a little... unique. Like the one named after it.

It's lunch now. Aya is eternally grateful to whichever deity was watching because Hatate does follow her to her usual dining table in the cafeteria (the table everyone knew is hers because it's covered in ink stains and scraps of paper glued to it). She packs her own lunch, a cute little bento with purple and black checkers on it, like the pattern on her skirt and ribbons. Aya wants to squeal a little.

Everybody else stares at the two of them, though. It's unusual for Aya to sit with anyone during lunch, because the table she sits on is called *her* table, and she's only thankful for lunchtime because then she can work on the newspaper for an hour or two without being bothered, or sometimes to rush some deadlines due on that day. With the amount of work she has to do in such a small amount of time, her table is almost always completely filled with papers and pens and, sometimes, broken cameras. She doesn't even eat at all on particularly busy days.

But right now, there's a girl nobody's ever noticed before, looking worse for wear, sitting right next to Aya and eating neatly packed food and not seeming to notice anyone staring at her at all. (*What a lie. She can feel them. She can feel them all. But her eyes sting from*

*crying so much, and her hands are still so numb they vibrate when she moves them, so she can't even flinch or tense her muscles as she always does when she feels those eyes on her back.)* It's almost unnerving how much attention Aya is getting now, if only because of the new arrival.

Quite suddenly, the brunette jolts. Almost everyone else in the cafeteria does, because Hatate's been so motionless for the past few minutes that everyone staring at her hadn't been expecting the sudden motion. She turns to Aya, brown eyes swirling with an unspoken question the reporter can just barely read; "*How did you know my name?*" Or something like that.

Aya blinks. Oh, yes, she forgot to tell her that... "By the way, I found out your name when I checked the school records. Just so you know." '*Make it casual, Shameimaru. Don't get her all suspicious and make her think you can read minds or something just as weird.*' "Uhh... Hatate Himekaidou, right?"

Hatate winces, eyes darting downwards to stare at the space in between them, a mere few inches of brown wood on the bench they were sitting on. The brunette instantly scoots away, turning back to her food once she's almost at the very edge of the table. They had been sitting near the middle just seconds ago. Aya feels a tiny bit insulted.

But then she remembers the attack the girl had in the music room just a day before, and that all it took for her to start panicking had been a single *glance* from the reporter, and Aya decides that today's definitely a much larger improvement from before. She stares at Hatate for a little again, who seems entirely focused on her food despite not even picking at it (she's gone to staring at the half-finished rice), and wonders if she has a problem or two. Or five.

Aya returns her attention to the article she's sure she normally would have finished about fifteen minutes ago. Today's another one of those rare days wherein she felt totally and absolutely unproductive and the only thing she wanted to do was lie down in bed and watch

some cheesy movies with a friend or three. Granted, the day had gone from normal (Reimu beating her up for a short paragraph Aya had accidentally let out for others to see), to strange (a letter that could only belong to Hatate based on the subject written), frightening (the event in the restroom), and then to strange once more (right now). Today, after all, is a Thursday - Aya's best days were normally on Thursdays. Then Hatate came along...

'... *So Hatate's the problem...* ' The reporter spares the still brunette another look, examining her every feature for anything that might signal that she might be an ally of Reimu's or Marisa's. But she looked innocent in every way, though perhaps not completely happy...

'*Ugh. Whatever.* ' Aya grabs a pen - it's always nice having everything one needs around them - and began to scribble absentmindedly on the paper she held. The subject's about the infamous younger Scarlet sister and the younger Komeiji sister having a very interesting relationship, and while Aya would normally find this quite to her tastes, she just doesn't feel very up to it today. Idly, she wonders why, before she caught the view of brown eyes staring curiously at her from her peripheral vision.

The reporter turns to face Hatate's general direction, cracking a weak smile at the brunette's immediate reaction (turn back to her food and not-so-subtly continue staring at Aya from the corner of her eye). "Anything you wanna tell me?"

Hatate only averts her gaze once more, this time half-turning her back. Aya almost laughs, until she sees that the brunette is still shivering slightly, and decides that it's not just embarrassment that the girl's showing. Her smile drops quickly, replaced by a thin line of worry. '*I mean, I promised her... but if I try to comfort her, or something, I might be too pushy... she's still scared of me! And if not scared, then she's uneasy around me... I'll just let her get more comfortable with me, and then we can get to a point where I can have legit conversations with her. Yeah, that sounds good.* '

Now a lot more comfortable with her situation, she shifts just a tiny bit closer to Hatate's seat and starts writing away on the article she holds. The words come much easier this time, for some reason.

(She misses the longing glance Hatate sends her way, specifically, on her hand, and how her brown eyes swim with unease and fear. The emotions are only birthed from her concern.)

---

Her boots bump against the corner of her room as she plunks down on her bed, instinctively folding her legs to her chest. It's become more of a habit than anything. She's even making sure to start wearing black shorts underneath now.

The first thing Hatate does is bury her face in her arms again. She doesn't close her eyes, and instead keeps them wide open to stare into darkness, or near-darkness, thoughts of all kinds sorting themselves in her brain. She can't get any closer to Aya than she is right now, no, she *can't* - if she did, it would distract her from getting good grades, and that's the objective she started with when she step foot in the school. To get good grades. That's nothing along the lines of 'get close to a person and potentially make your mother even worse than she already is'. She knows how her mother feels about being close to others. It only ends in heartbreak.

After lifting her face from her arms and blinking them to adjust to the light, she retrieves her phone from her blouse pocket and holds it open for her. Nimble fingers open up the app she needs and she quickly sifts through her photos. She knows what she's looking for here.

She had researched on Aya on the way home. It wasn't like there was really anybody in the way, so she could keep walking in a straight line without worrying about bumping into anyone. Hatate'd found out that most of Aya's life consisted not only of writing the newspaper, but also being beaten up by the people she writes about. She shivers briefly at the thought - are the people in this academy really that strong?

Her notes mentioned two names - Reimu and Marisa. She hadn't paid them much attention at first, because they were pretty far from her and therefore less likely to bother her, but she paid them special attention this time. Reimu prominently wears red and white clothes, has brown hair typically tied up in a ponytail with a ribbon, and sometimes uses a strange-looking stick to beat Aya up. She isn't a bully by any means, but she can lose her temper, and it certainly looks like she's lost her temper several times against the reporter by now.

Marisa prominently wears black and white clothes, has medium-length blonde hair with a braid on the side, and acts a lot like a witch. Sometimes, she puts on a generic witch hat and steals a broom from some janitor's closet to go parading about the school and set up some magic tricks. She seems to be a magician in-training, whatever that means, and likes to collect mushrooms. Rumor says she owns a mushroom garden, but no one else knows where her house is, so nobody except the witch herself knows. Hatate finds it exceedingly creepy, so she decides to stop reading from there.

So these are the two people who are part of Aya's regular schedule. Hatate frowns, staring at the screen on her phone, displaying an image with the two of them talking to one another. They seem to be best friends, or something along those lines, but they both honest-to-God scare her, really. Who could be that strong to cause that many bruises on just one person? Probably even more so if their target is Hatate herself... she trembles slightly, eyes going wide in fright. Aya looks like a tough person, but if she got *that* messed up... she doesn't want to know what would happen to herself if ever they decided to beat her up for a change.

'So Aya's used to it?' Her brow furrows in confusion. How can *anyone* get used to that sort of treatment from others? It looks absolutely nightmarish. If anything, one would normally try as much as possible to avoid writing about Reimu and Marisa to simultaneously avoid being beaten. *'But then those two seem to be the most popular in the school... so it makes sense that others would*



*want to read about them in a newspaper from a different view... in the end, Aya puts up with the beatings so that the newspaper she runs by herself can sell well?... That's... kind of... admirable. '*

She sighs and flips her phone back off, placing it in her trusty pocket. Hatate wasn't staring at Aya for nothing during lunch - she noticed the bored look the reporter had in those ruby eyes, and knew that the past few days in school hadn't been very interesting or chock-full of incidents like the previous issues of 'Bunbunmaru Newspaper' implied. (So what if she took a look at them the other day? She just wanted to see Aya's writing firsthand, that's all.) So... she does have to repay Aya for helping her out, if only just a little. And maybe an apology for all the events she's been blowing up lately.

Hatate digs through her bag and takes a look at the crumpled flyer for the Newspaper Club. There's only one date left that hasn't gone by already - three days from now, September 8 at 5:30 once more.

# you are so much more than what i deserve

## Chapter 3: you are so much more than what i deserve

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Hatate gets a nickname. Aya momentarily freaks.

---

Before Aya invited her to eat with her during lunch, Hatate always thought that eating alone during lunch was a perfectly normal and acceptable thing to do. Apparently, once you eat with someone, you're expected to eat with them for the rest of your school life. Or so Hatate hears.

She thinks it's a good thing she still remembers where Aya's table is situated, because that's immediately where she goes once lunchtime rolls around the next day. After all, she's expected to start eating with Aya all the time. If she stays quiet, sits as far away from Aya as possible, and just leaves quickly, it shouldn't be a problem.

Aya, however, does *not* think it's a good thing.

"Wha-Wha-What are you doing here?!" Aya stammers, staring incredulously at the brunette sitting on the bench and nibbling on her food.

Hatate blinks in surprise, shoulders tensing. She flinches away from the reporter, instinctively shrinking to attract less attention. Seeing this, Aya's expression softens, and she places her cafeteria tray on the table, taking a seat beside Hatate. "H-Hey, I'm sorry, I didn't mean... well... I g-guess you can eat here, but when I'm working..."

It is perfect that Hatate shoves the last spoon of rice in her mouth at that point, because she then fixes up her bento and stands up, stalking away and fading back into the shadows like she always has.

But one person still notices her. Ruby-red eyes narrow.

The next day, there are whispers again. Hatate frowns at each and every one she hears and manages to comprehend, which also means that her face is set in a very unhappy expression for most of the day. To perhaps slow down the rate of the whispers and rumors, she takes a seat at Aya's table once more, but finishes her food so quickly that she's already packing up when Aya arrives.

The reporter sets her tray on the table and furrows her brow in confusion at the brunette. "Hey, you always look pretty uncomfortable here... don't you usually eat alone? I mean, if you don't want to sit here, you don't have to..."

That's where you're wrong, Hatate wants to say. Don't you study in this school? Isn't it that when you sit with somebody for lunch, that's automatically the person you'll always eat with? But every time she opens her mouth, her tongue refuses to move, not even twitch, and Hatate realizes that it's just not in her place for her to tell the reporter as such. Instead, she stands up, brown eyes fixated on the floor as she makes her way back to the classroom. There's never anybody in the classroom during lunch. It's perfect.

And finally, when September 8 comes, Hatate has her phone in her blouse pocket and about three new pens in her bag. She's ready. She hopes.

---

She knocks on the door this time. Just to make sure, she keeps her eyes on the floor, because Aya's eyes make her feel a little faint and gives her the idea that she should lie down for a little while. Hearing a 'come in' from inside, she twists the knob and totters inside.

Glancing around, she sees that the music room is just the same as four days ago, littered with papers and boxes and pens. Hatate spots the same table, the same chair, and the same person sitting on the chair situated in the middle of the room. She takes a deep breath

and, before Aya can exclaim in surprise (as she's sure would happen if she doesn't react faster), she thrusts the flyer in Aya's face.

The reporter seems to be shock-still for a moment, taking in the implication of the unspoken statement, before she suddenly... the only appropriate word for it would be that she *explodes* . "Ha-Ha-Hatate! You're joining the club?! I mean, well... *auditioning* for the club - no, screw it! Even if you didn't know noun from verb, I'd still take you in! Are - Are you really joining it?!"

With as much effort as she could possibly put in, Hatate *nods* . She actually *speaks*, in a way. Her pigtails bob slightly, and she is reminded of how much work she put in them this morning, tying them as carefully as possible with her favorite violet-checkered ribbons.

Aya *squeals* . If Hatate isn't fast and reflexive, she would've been trapped and squeezed to death in a very Aya-like hug. She jumps away, back hitting the door, knees knocking together. Despite the breakthrough with the nod, she perhaps isn't very keen on the idea of a full-body hug just yet. But -

Their pinkies link.

Aya's hand.

Rough.

Calloused.

She loves it.

Hatate looks away, brown eyes feeling a little wet, as she tightens the hold. She feels Aya jolt the slightest bit, as if she hadn't been expecting that, but she can imagine the reporter's warm smile as she tightens the link, too.

It's as close to hand-holding and hugging as Hatate will ever get. Somehow, she feels it's okay. (It won't last. She knows. She doesn't

care.)

After Hatate is properly signed up, Aya eyes the brunette top-to-bottom, causing the poor girl to start shivering and trembling. Aya, of course, quickly attempts to amend that, and proceeds to talk instead. "S-So, Hatate... is it okay if I call you that? Well, I've been calling you that for the past few days, so I guess it doesn't really matter... anyway, you're really sure you're going to join the Newspaper Club? You're sure, you're absolutely sure? I'll be fine with it if you want to back out at any time, you know. Being a member means you have to go around interviewing others..."

And then, quite suddenly, Hatate realizes that *this is a horrible idea and why did she ever think she could possibly do good in this oh God oh God she can feel the terrible, hot bubbling feeling rising up again* -

"Are - Are you pani - no! Hatate, it's okay. It's okay. Look, I can do the interviewing. You can do the writing - err, some of it. I mean, I'd never make you do anything like that. I p-promised, right?" Aya laughs, trying to alleviate the brunette's rising panic. It comes out horribly nervous, though. "Hata-urgh, are you alright...?"

Hatate blinks, brown eyes glinting with confusion. Whenever she had an attack, it'd take more than just Aya's words and voice (*God*, her voice) to calm her down. No, this time, she calmed down like the reporter is somehow her psychiatrist... not that an actual psychiatrist would help her calm down at *all*, but Aya...

... had...

The brunette nods again. It's still tiring, and it still gives her that momentary feeling that the world's about to end, but it comes along a bit easier now. A glance upwards gives her the sight of Aya's smile, and Hatate feels her stomach wrench. "Glad you're okay, and I swear, I am so so sorry for suggesting you go around talk-well, I mean, doing *that* with your... situation... thing. Really, I can do all the

social work. You can do anything that I need help with. Really! Promise!"

*'She's making a promise I'm sure she won't keep,'* Hatate thinks, but it's more of her mother's voice than her own. It hurts to have it embedded in her brain, the cynicism her mother holds and imposes upon her...

"So anyway, the main thing I need right now is that I just want you to come around with me and see if there's anything happening. You know? Just keep an eye out for any and all incidents that look like they may be interesting. If they do, call me!" The reporter flashes a grin, simultaneously handing Hatate a slip of paper and a small keychain of a calligraphy brush. "That's my number - the paper, I mean. The keychain's something I made when I was bored. It's like a symbol for being in the Newspaper Club, you know? I'd like it if you, uh..." At this, a light blush overtakes her features, and Hatate blanches away from it. Someone as cute as Aya can't possibly be allowed to get any cuter than that. "... hang it on your weird flip-phone, too. If it's okay. I guess."

She takes the paper and the keychain, pocketing both in the same pocket she uses to keep her phone. That way, she'll definitely remember.

Aya suddenly starts talking again, though it's not like she ever stopped. "By the way... Hatate, um... do you... well, talk? Not to be rude, and all, but... if we can't communicate, how are we going to..."

Hatate winces, but nods to at least convey that *yes, I can talk*. She spots Aya's grimace, and internally frowns herself. "Well, if you can... I guess you just prefer not to? That's cool and all, but... hey, this is probably kind of creepy, but can you look at me?"

The brunette blinks. She hesitates, but obediently brings her face up to be visible. Her brown eyes swirl with reluctance and confusion, to which Aya seems to catch on immediately. "Sorry, I just... I can see the gist of what you're trying to say through your eyes. Like, I can

kind of tell what you're feeling by looking in them. Just so you know, your eyes are pretty... I mean. Um." She flushes red, but quickly catches herself and keeps talking to draw attention from the statement. (It doesn't work. Hatate thinks about *your eyes are pretty* all day.) "I guess if you just call me and then drop the call, my phone'll still buzz but we don't need to talk, and you can 'tell' me if there's an incident or anything." A bright smile appears on the reporter's face. "A missed call! Or something. Does that work, Hatatan?"

Silence.

Aya blinks. Hatate (*Hatatan?*) blinks.

And then the reporter realizes her mistake.

"Nooooo! No, no, no no no, I meant *Hatate! Hatate!* I totally meant that! Not *Hatatan* - where the shit did I even get that? *Hatate*, I said! I swear, I swear -"

A giggle bubbles through Hatate's throat and escapes from her mouth before she can stop it. To Aya, it's a throaty, dry giggle, but it's also the cutest thing she's ever heard. And perhaps the most precious giggle that has ever been made in the history of giggles. This reporter swears that she will write an article about giggles in the newspaper and about how underrated and unappreciated these adorable giggles are. She's serious. Really, she is.

But to Hatate, the giggle is perhaps the devil's advocate as she instantly flings herself away from her previous position and curls up into a ball by the door once again, trembling. '*What just happened? Did I just giggle? Did I just honest-to-God giggle? I haven't giggled in ten years. I haven't laughed in twelve. Did that really just happen? I want to die...*'

"Ha-Hatate!" Aya cries out, a little alarmed by the sudden reaction. "What happe-the giggle! No, no, that wasn't a mistake at all, that giggle was the cutest thing ever! Really! Wait, I know. You're going to

help me write an article about under-appreciated giggles and we're going to publish it in the school paper. It's going to sell as fast as wildfire spreads. *Hatatan - fuck!* "

The brunette lifts her head, the unfamiliar urge to quirk her lips upward coming to her the moment she hears *Hatatan* once more. It's like a fond nickname for someone... which she's never had, unless *piece of shit* and *worthless waste of oxygen* and *should-never-have-been-born* can be considered 'fond nicknames one gives to oneself'. Hatate hopes not. But then hearing *Hatatan* coming from Aya's mouth makes her want to smile and laugh and *giggle* like the seven-year-old she never was.

Apparently, lifting her head was a mistake, because Aya can clearly see her brown eyes flashing in delight, which gives the reporter a horrid idea. "Oh, so you *like* being called 'Hatatan', huh? It feels good, doesn't it? It's probably because I like your name so much it's all I think about, but I came up with 'Hatatan' because it sounds so cute on you, huh, doesn't it?"

Hatate squirms slightly, burying her face back in her arms in an effort to hide her emotions. She thinks it's a drawback for Aya, because then she can't see the absolute happiness spreading throughout the whole of her chocolate-brown eyes, but the reporter doesn't seem to really care by this point. "Tell you what. I'll call you *Hatatan* as many times as you like... but in return, why don't you laugh more?"

Hatate freezes. And with that, the light fades away from her face like it's being sucked in by a vacuum cleaner. *'Laugh more? I just said... thought... that I haven't laughed since I was five. This is impossible. I can't... just... is this somehow supposed to be some sort of rehabilitation process? Does she think I have a 'problem'?''*

There's a *tap-tapping* on her head, and the brunette feels a shiver pass through her entire body. However much she doesn't want to, though, she raises her head the slightest bit, just enough for her eyes to be seen for Aya to comprehend. She tries not to think about those ruby eyes boring into her soul, but when Aya speaks, it's not



what she expects. "I mean... I *can* call you Hatatan, right? You have to admit, it's really cute on you. I don't expect you to change for me... I guess I just, um, wanted to see you smile. Just a little."

The reporter rubs the back of her head sheepishly, smiling lightly. "Sorry?"

Hatate shakes her head, more to herself than to Aya, then extends her hand once more, curling all her fingers except for one. Aya takes her pinky in hers, smile growing as she tightens the link, and Hatate feels safer than she's ever been in years.

"So then... let's get you started, yeah?"

---

Hatate goes home with a stack of papers, about five new pens Aya gave her, and the reporter's number. Not to mention the calligraphy brush keychain still in her pocket, which will be her main priority once she gets back in her room.

As a beginning task, Aya's asked her to write a short article about an incident she's been having trouble writing about, which is about Alice Margatroid, a renowned puppeteer and doll-maker in the school, having been revealed to have been making dolls based off real-life people, most notably those in her class. Hatate finds it cute, if not slightly creepy, though it's probably nothing more than a hobby to this Alice person.

The papers she brings home are all previous editions of Bunbunmaru, which will hopefully serve as something of a guide for her until she can write for herself. The brunette's read one edition, the latest one, and skimmed through a few, but is definitely going to read them top to bottom, scrutinize every word until she's memorized each and every article. She's this determined. She can't - *won't* - fail Aya now.

But when she opens the door to her house, her mood drops like a stone.

On most days, her mother is on the couch, staring at the unplugged television blankly. If Hatate is lucky, she's in her room with the radio blaring and the television in *there* blaring even louder. If Hatate is *especially* lucky, the house is completely and utterly silent. But if Hatate is very, very unlucky, her mother will be up and about, being the person she hasn't been until three years ago.

Today is one of those very unlucky days.

The moment Hatate steps on the threshold of their house, the lanky brunette is stamping on the wooden floor, crashing to a halt inches away from Hatate. "*What* do you think you are *doing*, young lady?"

"It's only five forty," Hatate says, voice stiff. If she shows weakness in front of her mother, then nothing will ever be okay in her life again.

"My curfew is six. I've done nothing wrong."

"Don't you speak to me that way. No, what I *meant* is *why* you are holding those *ridiculous* papers like your life depends on them!" Her mother spits, saliva flying everywhere. Hatate shifts uncomfortably, if only to hold the papers in an angle in an effort to avoid them getting wet.

"These are for school."

"I can see - *what* in the name of the Lord is this 'Bunbunmaru Newspaper'?"

"I'm checking them for grammar editing. I get extra credit if I do so."

Brown eyes narrow, suspicion evident. Hatate tenses her shoulders, prepared for anything her mother might send her way. *Yell at me for lying. Yell at me for even implying I joined the Newspaper Club. Yell at me for talking to you without looking you in the eye. Anything. I know what's coming. This has happened time and time again. I can deal with it.*

Her finger tingles. Aya's touch.

Hatate's mother snorts, then brushes Hatate out of her way, moving quickly down the stairs and across the street. "I'm heading to the bar and the usual place. Make sure dinner's ready by ten."

Then she's gone. Hatate's legs wobble, ready to collapse under the pressure, before she takes a deep breath and sprints into her room, kicking off her boots as soon as the door closes behind her. Leaning against the wall, she gives a long, relieved sigh, trying not to imagine what would have happened if her mother had realized there wouldn't be any use in checking grammar for a newspaper dated two months ago.

After locking the door and setting an alarm on her clock for nine fifteen, Hatate makes herself comfortable in a veritable pile of blankets, nestling in as she surrounds herself with just about everything she would need - a clipboard, the newspapers, the blank papers, pens and pencils and other writing materials. She then proceeds to read every single paper she had gotten.

It takes a while, but finally, Hatate sets the last crumpled paper down, head spinning and eyes stinging from how long she had used them. The clock reads nine o' seven, and Hatate stands up, brushing some papers off of her lap. Her limbs tingle with numbness, causing the brunette to wince slightly, but she continues through the door and finds herself at the kitchen nonetheless.

All the while as she absentmindedly cooks dinner, Hatate thinks. She thinks about Alice Margatroid. She thinks about the article. She thinks that she should research more about the puppeteer on her phone for a clearer result. She thinks of the calligraphy pen keychain. She thinks about Aya. And when she starts thinking about Aya, she doesn't stop.

She places a plate of food on the one-person dining table and brings a much smaller one to her room. Hatate brings out a table lamp she hasn't used in years and brushes the dust off of it, setting it down on her study table, along with the rest of the newspapers and the clipboard that holds some blank sheets. She turns off the lights in an

effort to make it look like she's asleep, but turns on the lamp then, and sets to work.

Hatate doesn't sleep until three in the morning, face-first on the paper she had been furiously writing on, flip-phone flickering on and off as the battery dwindles down to two percent. A two-page article about Alice Margatroid and her doll-making hobby is finished.

She dreams of ruby eyes and the tingles her skin gets every time the reporter's hand makes contact with her skin.

# someday, i'll see everything with you

## Chapter 4: someday, i'll see everything with you

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Hatate doesn't feel too well. Aya "visits".

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alternate chapter title: i wish i knew what i feel, but more importantly, what do you think?

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"D-Done already?" Aya stammers. "I wasn't expecting that... thought you'd be someone who was more of the 'take-her-time' person..."

Hatate shifts uncomfortably, wringing her hands atop her checkered skirt. Her eyes are heavy, and she can already feel the eyebags glowing underneath them. It's only one night, she thinks. It's not like that sort of thing is going to happen again. Right?

A few seconds tick by. Red eyes scan the paper, widening and narrowing at appropriate times.

"Well," Aya says, setting the paper down on a table. "Your writing style's certainly interesting."

The brunette blinks. She wonders if 'interesting' is a compliment or an insult.

"There are a few parts that need fixing, and a few parts wherein I can't understand a word or two, and a few parts where it looks like you're trying too hard to copy my style..."

Each phrase jabs into Hatate's chest. She feels suffocated, though she tries to convince herself it's only because it's hot. Really. Nothing else.

"... but there are also a few parts that are *really* good. I think you're the person who sees things *real* deep in others. Y'know, I always thought that Margatroid was just some creepy stalker who got lonely after a while and goes all *yandere* when someone rejects her, but maybe this thing you wrote here has a point?"

The constricting feeling fades, replaced by a warmer one. Hatate tries not to think too hard about the words 'really good'. Instead, she raises her head, allowing Aya to see the question swirling in the brunette's eyes.

"Huh - which part? I think it's... yeah, this one, '*After some research done on the Internet, it appears that Miss Margatroid lives alone after running away from her mother and her relatives. It seems to be that she creates dolls not only as a hobby, but perhaps a sort of coping mechanism, in hopes that she will be able to have her family back with the presence of such dolls. Her lonesome and clingy nature is a result from living solitarily for most of her life. Perhaps all she needs is some friends?*' Yeah, I like this one. Let's keep it."

Hatate nods slightly, head dipping in a momentary state of sleep. She hears a giggle from Aya's general direction, and she's suddenly reminded of the article the reporter wanted to write about yesterday. Something about giggles.

"You're so cu... funny when you're falling asleep, *Hatatan*," Aya says, crawling closer to Hatate, then seeming to think better of it as she backs away to her previous position. Extending her hand, she loops their pinkies together and asks, "What time d'you sleep last night for you to get *this* out of it? Hmm... two? Three?"

The brunette sighs, feeling like she really and honestly needs something to rest her head on else her chin would drop and her head would come tumbling off her shoulders, she's *sure*. She risks a search-around with her hands, finds something soft, and lays her head on it without even thinking anymore. She hears a squeak that sounds vaguely like Aya, but pays it no mind. After all, this soft thing is probably just a stack of papers or whatnot...

The pinky link tightens. Hatate mumbles incoherently and tightens it back. She hears Aya's chime of a laugh, and dozes off.

---

"Hey~! It's the new edition of Bunbunmaru Newspaper! Come and get it, everyone! Yoohoo~!"

A pair of bright blue eyes blink curiously at the bedraggled newcomer. "Ohh, who's this? I think I remember you... Hatate, right? My locker-mate?"

Hatate lifts her head up the slightest bit from her arms. She's got them settled comfortable on the table for her to rest her chin on. Aya laughs a little. "This one's Hatate Himekaidou! She's the new member of the Newspaper Club, can you believe it?"

Nitori's pigtails bounce as she jumps in surprise at the exclamation. "Seriously?! That's great, Aya, Hatate! You know, you know," she turns to face the drowsy brunette. "Ever since Tenma, the founder of the Newspaper Club, graduated, only Aya here decided to join. It's been sooo long since she's found another member. I hope you be good to her!"

"Huuh? Don't be like that, Hatatan's good at this!" Aya exclaims, laughing as she hands a copy of the newspaper to a student, saying thank you and waving goodbye after. "Oh, Hata, I don't think I've ever introduced you before? This one's Nitori Kawashiro, she's not an official member of the club since she's already in the swim team, but she helps me distribute the newspapers on these days. Nitori, this is Hatate, as you know! She doesn't talk much, and doesn't like talking to others she doesn't know, so don't be too pushy like you sometimes are."

"P-Pushy! I'm not pushy!"

Hatate shifts her seat to the edge of the table, resting her head on her arms once more. Closing her eyes, she lets out a mental sigh, happy to be out of the conversation. By this time, about a week or

two after she had officially joined the club, she was a little bit more comfortable with others, given that she's in immediate reach to Aya. Alone? She's still hopeless. Hatate doesn't like that she relies on the reporter for everything and follows her around like some lost puppy, but she can't help it. She needs a rock, an anchor, or else she'll lose it again.

Someone taps her on the shoulder. The brunette almost screams - almost - but manages to barely restrain it. Her muscles tense, but a vaguely-familiar voice calls, "Hello? Can I have a copy of the paper?"

Hatate forces herself to look up, spotting white and red in her hazy vision. Momiji Inubashiri. Of course. The brunette nods, taking a copy from the nearby stack and handing it to the white-haired student. Momiji dips her head in acknowledgement, greets Nitori and Aya with a wave and a 'good luck!', and goes on her way. Hatate sighs, vocally this time, and decides to move a bit closer to Aya. Safer this way. Others would much prefer to ask Aya for a copy than for the strange girl sleeping next to her.

She's slightly disappointed that she can't loop pinkies with Aya, but she glances upwards, catching sight of the reporter's bright smile, and she decides that's all the thanks she needs.

A little later, once lunchtime is done, Hatate's shuffling back to her usual seat in the classroom, but she is interrupted rather abruptly by a pale white hand on her shoulder.

She *jumps* . She *jolts* . She crumples down to the floor, shaking and trembling and wishing she could call out for Aya. But all that comes out of her mouth are ragged, terrified breaths that silence the whole room.

"Hatate!" Rapid footsteps on wood - a pinky interlocked with hers. A comforting presence. Hatate sighs. "Hatate, are you... no, you're obviously not okay, but... calm down, calm down..."



"Is she alright?" a worried voice asks, high-pitched. "Momiji, w-what'd you do to her?"

"I just... I wanted to ask her something, but then she..." Deeper, but still feminine. Laced with concern and confusion.

"It's okay, Hata, hear that? It was only Momiji, she doesn't mean any harm..." The grip tightens, and Hatate lets out an involuntary whimper, hoping against hope that everything will just *stop* and the brunette can reverse everything she's ever done. The only thing she's good for is causing trouble for everyone. It's just Momiji, it's just Momiji, it's *just Momiji*, and Aya's here...

Her chest unravels. Air comes faster and easier than ever before. Hatate slumps into Aya's arms, shivering at the cold touch of skin. Why does it have to be this way? Why am I like this? Why can't I be like Aya, who's not scared of anyone? Why? Why?

"Ha-Hatate?" a soft voice calls. No, it's not really soft, Hatate just can't hear it anymore - everything feels horribly fuzzy...

She hears more voices, louder, shakier, but no, that's just her...

---

She wakes up in a hospital bed - no. It's just the school clinic. It stinks of hospital scent, though.

Hatate pushes herself to sit up unsteadily, her breath hitching when she spots Momiji on a stool right next to her, and with no Aya nearby. *'No, no, I don't want it to happen again... '*

"Feeling better?" the white-haired girl asks, curious red eyes (but not as pretty as Aya's, Hatate finds herself thinking) staring at her, then averting their line of vision to her lap. "Sorry for surprising you there, I didn't know..."

The brunette soon tunes her out, more out of tiredness than irritation. She looks around, wincing at the sterile white surroundings. She

*hates* hospitals. Clinics - whatever. They're all the same. Hatate kicks the sheets off and slips her feet into her boots, lacing them up with practiced ease. She hears wood scraping on the floor behind her and tries not to think about Momiji's eyes boring into her back.

"Are you going already? Can I ask a question first?"

Hatate shifts slightly. Under normal circumstances (read: If she were with Aya), she would raise her head to reveal brown eyes showcasing the answers, but Momiji isn't a reporter. She's just... Momiji. In a way that isn't offending, that is. Instead, the brunette nods, suppressing the panicky feeling she gets when the white-haired girl opens her mouth once more.

"Thanks. I read the paper, and I saw... is your name Hatate Himekaidou?"

*Nod. Suppress.*

"I see... so you joined the Newspaper Club?"

*Nod. Suppress.*

"That's nice. Since Tenma graduated, the only other student who showed interest in writing for the paper was Aya... and she's always overworking herself, staying up late everyday to finish articles and such. While Nitori and I would want to join the club with her, we're already in our respective groups, so we can only really help her with distributions..."

*Nod... suppress...*

"She seems to like you quite a bit. I hope you can stay with her in that club for some time." Though Hatate doesn't look up, she can imagine the small smile Momiji has. "By the way, you have a fever."

'...' The brunette feels slightly woozy. *'Shouldn't that declaration have come first?'*

A little later, Aya flies into the clinic, babbling on and on, asking if Hatate's okay, if she needs to lie down a little more or anything like that. It brings a tiny, tiny smile to the brunette's face, but after a while, she has to shush the reporter with tired brown eyes because *wow, she can talk fast*. Nurse Yagokoro comes in with a clipboard once Aya's shut up for about three minutes, saying that Hatate's going to have to stay at home for a little.

"You haven't been sleeping well lately, have you?" The grey-haired nurse raises an eyebrow, momentarily looking up from her clipboard. "Your fever's been here since three days ago. Didn't you feel anything?"

'No, ' Hatate wants to say. *'I haven't felt a thing because I stopped myself from feeling. It's better that way. Gets things done faster. These articles are more important than my health. Aya's more important than me... '*

She doesn't say anything, though. She just nods, and takes a slip from the nurse, shuffling out of the clinic with Aya and Momiji trailing behind her. As Hatate takes out her phone, flips it on, and stares at the screen, she knows what she has to do for the next two days that she won't be present.

She has to write. Not rest, not sleep, nothing. She has to *write* .

The calligraphy brush dangling off the side of her phone reminds her of such.

---

The next morning, at six-thirty sharp, Hatate wakes up and feels sicker than she's ever felt before. She feels so sick, it's like her blood is frozen and her limbs will stay numb for the rest of eternity, not to mention the horrid pounding in her head that leaves her train of thought fuzzy. There's no way she's going to be able to write like this.

But she has to. She *has* to. This is all for Aya. Right?

The brunette pushes herself off the bed with great difficulty, wincing as her breaths come out heavy and laden with effort. She brushes her teeth and fixes her hair sloppily, but doesn't dare take a bath just yet, feeling like she would melt into a puddle of Hatatan if she stepped into water, cold or hot. Instead, she washes her face and takes a seat by her study table, facing several Post-It Notes stuck on the wall.

*Mystia Lorelei/Kyouko Kasodani made punk band 9/12/14*

*Moriya Club conspiracy? More research needed*

*Ran Yakumo goes crazy after losing fried tofu 9/11/14*

*Certain templates banned in school 9/14/14*

Hatate's sure there had been a truckload of news to be gathered that had happened yesterday, on September 15, but when she had gotten home, she'd fallen face-first onto her pillow and slept the night away. Much to her immense luck, last night was one of those times that her mother stayed in the bar for the night, so she didn't have to make dinner for her.

She grabs a blank sheet of paper from a nearby stack, hand wobbling as she uses the dark-purple-black pen to scribble *Best friends Mystia Lorelei and Kyouko Kasodani form punk rock band* before she feels her vision going hazy. Why are there sunspots? She isn't even looking at the sun.... Hatate feels ready to black out right then and there. But no, she drags herself to slump down on her bed, curling up tight in a mountain of blankets and pillows, shivering in the frightening cold. Her heater is on, she *knows*, so why is it...

She *hates* fevers.

About a couple hours later, with the brunette drifting in and out of sleep, she hears muffled footsteps echoing in the hallway. Hatate doesn't pay it any mind, assuming it's simply her mother, though she appears to have come home much earlier than usual. She forces

herself to stand up and walk the short distance between her bed and her door, locking it in case her mother decided to come in and see the pathetic state her daughter is in. As Hatate's numbing fingers adjust the lock, her forehead bumps against the door, and the brunette sighs, because *when has she ever become like this?*

But instead of a door opening and slamming shut like what always happens when her mother comes home from the bar, there's only the repetitive sound of footsteps again and again and again. Hatate finds herself focusing a bit more - it's not like her mother to start pacing back and forth, or get lost in a house that she's lived in for years. No, these footsteps don't even sound like her mother's, but they're eerily familiar...

*Knock. Knock.*

Hatate all but shrieks, jumping backwards and hitting her back against her bed. Idly, she thanks her mother for buying her a soft bed, but at this point she can't bring herself to care anymore. *Is it a murderer? A rapist? An enemy of her mother? Tax collectors?!* She doesn't know. She can't think. *It hurts it hurts it hurts.*

"Ha-Ha-Hatate?"

Muscles relax. Shoulders go down. Eyes blink open. Before she can help herself, she blurts out, "Aya?"

Silence. Then, *knock*. "Um... can... can I... come in... I mean... um..."

Hatate pushes herself up to wobbling legs, eyes still wide and mouth still hanging open, as she unlocks the doorknob and turns it open. She's face-to-face with ruby red eyes, short black hair, and annoyingly adorable freckles that Hatate's never noticed before. Since when has Aya even had freckles? Or maybe she's just never gotten this close to the reporter to see them clearly before...

*Oh, God, I'm so close, if I move just one bit -*

Hatate jerks backwards, almost tripping over her own feet. Aya yelps, lunging forward and swiftly catching the brunette, clutching her tightly as if scared to let go. Hatate tenses instinctively, hands raising up to push the reporter away - but no. Her skin is on hers, and it just feels so *natural* instead of wrong, so *warm* instead of cold, and Hatate wonders where Aya's been all her life.

The reporter gently, slowly (*unwillingly*) lets her go, arms dropping limply back to their sides. A moment of silence passes until Aya cautiously extends her hand, pinky outstretched. Hatate takes Aya's whole hand and presses it against her chest, right above where her heart is, in a desperate attempt to keep herself standing. She is just so *tired* without even having done anything, bags under her eyes weighing down more than ever, and she feels awfully self-conscious about her frazzled hair and the blouse-skirt uniform she had worn the day before...

Aya wordlessly leads her to her bed, carefully setting her down and laying her head on the pillows. Hatate doesn't argue, instead, simply curling up into a shivering ball of sick and flinging the covers on top of herself. She hears wood scraping on wood, and a comfortable presence beside her - Aya's sitting atop a chair, probably feeling incredibly uncomfortable but sticking with it anyway.

Hatate cannot thank her enough, right from the very bottom of her heart.

---

When she wakes up, an estimated two hours or so later, she sees a lukewarm bowl of soup on her study table and her stack of Post-It Notes beside it. With great effort, the brunette drags herself over to the table and, as she takes hesitant sips of the soup, reads the note Aya presumably left for her on one of the Notes.

*"I took the liberty of pasting a couple of news topics I'd like you to write about that I didn't get to tell you yesterday! All the new ones are at the bottom-left corner of the wall so you'll find them easier. Also,*

*some soup. Get well soon, and PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE DON'T OVERWORK YOURSELF! -Aya*

*PS: I may or may not sometimes see you heading this way after school. Totally not a stalker. "*

It brings a weak smile to Hatate's face, but even that takes enough effort to drain her motivation to do anything for a few years maybe. The brunette finishes the soup, even though it makes her want to puke more out of the fever than out of the taste, and pushes the bowl away, reminding herself to wash it later. With a sigh, she crawls over to the new patch of Post-Its on her wall, which amount to about... two.

Hatate blinks. Does Aya really underestimate her with her new fever? Usually, she gives around four or five... well, it's only good that the brunette just rests for some time. The two new notes look simple, mainly because Hatate has already researched about the two topics a few nights before (Saigyouji's supposed 'haunted tree' and the mad cackling reportedly heard at the Scarlet Mansion at nighttime). After running through some potential drafts over her head, Hatate wills herself to hold her pen with her still-unsteady hand and write some ideas on a scrap paper.

Hatate spends the next few hours in the same position, scribbling and scrawling all over the paper until the words start to overlap each other. (It only occurs to her to flip the paper to the blank side when she realizes she's written over the same sentence three times.) When the clock hits one in the afternoon and she hears a door slamming shut, she flinches and looks down at her stomach. *'I really should eat something... but if it's one, that means mother is home, and she never eats lunch at the bar because she says the food there is shit... and I'm so tired... but I have to... '*

Pushing herself up, she drags her feet across the wooden floor, but winces at the scraping sound it makes and decides to walk a little more properly. Slipping into the kitchen, she whips up a quick sandwich, enough to keep her mother at bay until Hatate can find it

in herself to make something better, and places it on a tray. Going back to the hallway, she stops in front of her mother's room and places her ear against the door to make sure the woman is really there. A loud crashing noise is audible, which doesn't surprise Hatate as much as it used to years ago, and so she knocks on the door.

She steps back moments before it swings open, just barely avoiding colliding with her face. Her mother is there, short cropped brown hair even messier than usual, and eyes bloodshot. But when she shouts her usual greeting ("What the fuck do you want?!"), it's cut off at the end.

"... What the... fuck... Hatate?"

The brunette's tired eyes go wide. She tries and fails to remember the last time her mother called her by name. Perhaps three years ago? Four? But when she realizes her mother is waiting for an answer, she asks, "What is it?"

"What the hell happened to you? You look terrible!"

*'Since when have you cared? I don't mean this in the offending way, but since when have you cared, mother?'* "I have a fever. It's why I'm not in school."

"Shit! You look like a fucking zombie! Is that a *sandwich* ? You made me a *sandwich* ?" Hatate closes her eyes, hunches her shoulders, and braces herself for a slap on the face, but it never comes. Instead, unfamiliar hands (*when was the last time mother touched me without the intent to hurt?*) take away the load of the sandwich plate from Hatate's own hands, and the brunette looks back up, brown eyes flickering in confusion. "A fever is what you get from overworking. Lock yourself up in that room and don't go back to school for five days at least!"

*'Is this your way of showing affection? Or do you just not want me to get in your way?'* "The nurse said-"



"Screw what the nurse said! You look like you're three-fourths dead! Now go sleep the day away. I don't care, I can make my own food. Go!"

Hatate wants to cry. She wants to sob, to wail, to do everything because what the hell is happening? She just got a fever, and it's not that bad! (It's what she wants to think, at least, but she knows it's the worst fever she's ever encountered.) Now Aya's made her soup, and her mother is saying that she can go to the kitchen and pile up some bread and meat for a sandwich?

She nods, barely, and trudges back to her room. Today, it seems, is a day for contemplation and quiet writing.

At seven, she's back at her desk, staring forlornly at the half-filled paper before her (the newer side, anyway). She's written enough for one article, but it honestly looks to her that it's not even half the amount she normally writes. So Hatate picks up her pen, silently thanks it for not running out of ink even after such rigorous writing for so long, and goes on her writing.

It continues well on until ten o'clock, to which Hatate's head promptly dropped to the table, eyes closed and dozing away. Somehow, through the determination she had fixated on her writing, she had completely forgotten she was supposed to have been resting.

# just want to be something, a name you call

Chapter 5: just want to be something, a name you call

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Aya swings by an aptly-named pharmacy. Hatate opens her mouth.

---

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alternative chapter title (the one used in ffn): all of my words come out wrong

both are from pardon me/he is we

merry christmas!!

---

The next morning, Hatate is awakened by strange voices she'd never imagine would be in a conversation, and at eight-thirty in the morning.

"-friend. I'm here to deliver her homework!"

"Homework, now, huh? You better not be some rapist!"

"Ehh?! I'm not! Really!"

"You piece of shit! I see that look in your eyes! Are you sure those papers aren't porn you've been delivering to my daughter?!"

*"Why would you even think that?! Ahh, d-don't hit me!"*

With immense strength and speed unfit for someone with a raging fever, the brunette has slipped into fluffy bedroom slippers and is racing down the stairs by the time she hears a loud banging sound. Nearly tripping over the steps, Hatate skids to a stop just by the front door to meet the sight of Aya curled up in a corner, attempting to

defend herself while the brunette's mother holds a very, very large frying pan in hand. Hatate doesn't need to ask to know what the situation is.

Aya, fast as she is, flies to hide behind the brunette almost immediately. "Ha-Hatatan! Your mom is scary, I think she's trying to kill me! *Please stop her oh God I'm going to die!* "

The corner of Mrs. Himekaidou's lip curls downwards in disgust. "These are the kind of people you befriend, girl? I'm amazed by your insanely bad taste."

"Aya's a... good person," Hatate forces out, trying not to fling herself away from Aya to deny she had ever used her disgusting voice. "... She helps me."

The reporter behind her doesn't say a thing. Hatate wants to cry and scream and slam her own head against the wall, because why why why did she ever speak? It's a mistake, a mistake, a *mistake* -

"Never thought you'd actually talk in front of another person," her mother spits, throwing the frying pan to the table nearby. "You must adore this girl to do anything like that, and *run down the fucking stairs while you have a fever*. Didn't I tell you to *get some rest*? Now shoo! Back to your room!"

"Breakfast-"

"I know how to cook my motherfucking eggs, girl!"

---

Hatate leads Aya back up the stairs and into her room wordlessly, feet dragging as her momentary adrenaline rapidly runs out. With Aya safe, and her mother no longer trying to kill someone with a frying pan the brunette never even knew they owned, there's really no other reason for her to get worked up.

The brunette attempts to open the door for Aya, but her legs buckle out at the last second and she just ends up face-first against the wooden door, hand awkwardly dangling from her arm by her side instead of firmly clutching the knob. Hatate wants to slam her head against a nearby cement wall repeatedly until her skull splits open, but she can hear Aya stifle a giggle behind her, and *okay, maybe my accidents have a use.*

Aya carefully holds her by the waist, trying to gently take her out of the way, and opens the door for both of them. Hatate shakes the reporter away half-heartedly, trudging into her room and not even bothering to kick off her slippers before collapsing onto her bed.

“Oh, uh. Hatatan.” She turns around just enough for one brown eye to peek curiously at the blinking Aya. “Umm. Homework. Studies. And... stuff.” The reporter clears her throat, before gesturing at the bag slung around her body. Hatate stares at it, not sure what to do besides look at the blue bag bursting with papers and pens. Is that a camera strap she sees?

Undeterred, though perhaps a little embarrassed, Aya flips the bag open, digs through a frightening amount of papers, and manages to retrieve a few notebooks and a binder. The reporter opens the notebooks up, points at some surprisingly clean notes and briefly explains what they are, and, curiously enough, flushes bright red when she sees the binder in her hands.

Hatate creeps over to the notebooks at the edge of her bed, eyeing the meticulously-written notes. She almost wants to ask - *almost* - if these were for her or for Aya. Then she makes the mistake of looking up at Aya’s hopeful face, as if the reporter’s waiting for her approval, and the brunette has to bite her lower lip to keep from squealing uncontrollably. Instead, she opts to nod, shadowing her eyes and forcing a small smile. Aya, in return, grins and begins jabbering away about the events at school yesterday.

It’s when Hatate realizes that today is only a Wednesday, and there’s nothing happening going on that would cancel classes. A quick

glance at the clock on her bedside table reads the time to be half-past nine.

Brown eyes widen. Aya pauses, voice trailing off in confusion. Hatate opens her mouth, before once again getting that horrific feeling of her tongue getting cut off, *snip-snip*, and, oh, God, why does she have to -

“Hata?”

A quiet voice. A hand. Just a hand on hers.

Rough.

Calloused.

Just like how she remembers it.

“Hatate? It’s okay. You know it’s okay, right?”

A shudder passes down her spine. It remains to be seen if the shudder is one from fright or pleasure. Her breath hitches, her head drops to hide her face (her *ugly ugly ugly* face), and her legs fold to let her knees rest against her chest.

But her hand remains where it is, and Aya’s hand doesn’t move.

It’s okay.

(The only thing that isn’t okay, though, is that there are two words, six letters, that make Hatate whimper.)

(For now.)

---

She remembers her voice is scratchy. Rough. Dry. *Disgusting*, above all else.

Hatate hasn't used her voice very much. There's really only one person she ever really talks to, and it's not even on a daily basis. Her vocal chords don't get much exercise. Unused to talking to other people besides her mother, she snaps, shuts down - whatever you want to call it. The point is: she doesn't like it. She doesn't like talking, doesn't like her voice, and just about everything else.

But that doesn't have to mean others don't like it. Specifically - a certain reporter with fluffy black hair and ruby red eyes who holds Hatate's heart, body, and soul in her palm.

All so soft, so fragile, that they can break in an instant. If Aya Shameimaru were to slowly close her fingers around these things, Hatate Himekaidou will shatter.

Isn't it such a good thing that Aya Shameimaru is only careful with the things she cares about?

---

Within two seconds of closing her eyes, she falls asleep.

She wakes up about ten or so minutes later. Aya is still there, surprisingly enough, bright eyes staring at the brunette's face. Hatate blinks - so does Aya. Then the reporter smiles reassuringly, crooked at the edges, her eyes crinkling. Hatate returns it as best as she can, which is to say she just barely manages a grimace.

"Feeling better? Well, regarding your fever?"

Hatate shrugs. The very movement sends a pang of pain straight to her head, so maybe not. She doesn't mention this to Aya, of course. Not that she would be capable of doing so.

The reporter smiles a little wider. "Is it okay if I stay here for a while?"

*'It would be even better if you stayed here for the rest of eternity while we still have time, '* Hatate muses, only responding with a nod.

*'But that's being selfish. Even more selfish than usual, of course, because having you right here is selfishness in its best. '*

"Well, good." A chiming laugh. "I wouldn't wanna go back down and face your mom again. Who knows what household item she'll turn into a menacing weapon next time. You got a window or something?"

*'Logically, mother would be in her room right now, ' Hatate thinks, sparing her clock a glance. 'If she's in a good mood, or, more likely, a less bad mood than usual, she'll be watching reality TV. If you're quiet, you can get out while you still can. I'll help you. Really, it'd be easy. I'll mask your footsteps. '*

It's a few seconds too late before Hatate notices that Aya's zipped in front of her study table, skimming over last night's paper innocently. The brunette makes to stand up, blushing, but the reporter beats her to it. "When'd you write this? It's pretty nice if you get past all the... well... errors."

*'It only makes sense for a mistake like me to make even more mistakes, ' Hatate idly supposes. She slips off the bed as noiselessly as possible, padding her way over to the table, messy papers scattered everywhere. Aya already has a pencil in hand, scratching out the errors and writing the words and phrases above. They're nowhere near neat like her school notes, but they're legible, at the very least. That is to say: Hatate can just barely make out the letters.*

The next few minutes go by like that in silence - the brunette grabbed the most comfortable chair in her room for Aya, while she opted to sit on the floor and scribble some of the more recent news, according to the reporter's newly-acquired gossip. Aya makes herself busy by correcting and proofreading Hatate's half-asleep work, which only makes the brunette even more self-conscious of what she had written last night. And why is she *still* wearing her purple pajamas and the fluffy bedroom slippers? Jesus Christ, she wants to tell herself, you're even more of a failure than usual today in Aya's presence, Himekaidou.

“Hey, Hata?” Aya speaks up. Her voice is unnaturally loud in the quiet room. The brunette almost jumps, but manages to keep her cool. Brown eyes glance up at the reporter questioningly. “Okay, so... I’m not gonna push it or anything, but... can I ask you some questions?”

She stills. Her hand goes limp, pen dropping to the floor and rolling until it hits a chair leg. Her eyes dim. It’s almost like the very life is sucked away from her, which she wouldn’t mind right now, really.

*‘But this is Aya, and the only thing I can really, truly do for her is to follow her,’* she thinks numbly, and she realizes that mindless devotion is really going to be her downfall. *(But then this is mindless devotion to Aya, and that always goes well, because it’s Aya.)* So Hatate only allows the slightest of shivers and tries not to tie a noose and hang herself when she nods.

Though she doesn’t look up, she can feel the warmth emanating from Aya’s smile. “If it bothers you, just, like... tell me to stop, okay? I’ll stop, I promise.” *(Promises. She loves them with a burning hatred to go along with it.)* “If it gets too intense for you or anything, I... I’ll go away, I guess. Or something. I don’t know, I-”

*‘It hurts. It hurts. It hurts.’* Blank cardboard eyes. *‘Don’t go away. Why? Why would you even do that? But then if you leave me, even if it will hurt, even if it will kill me, even if it will pierce my heart with spears and swords ten times over, it would be the smartest thing to do. I’m just a parasite, after all. I’m not useful for much else other than to pity. Why do you even bother with me? Your leaving would be completely justified. And that is what hurts the most.’*

“Hatate?”

The brunette chokes back a sob and makes the mistake of looking up, again, for the second time that day. She stares right up into glittering red eyes.



Her back is against the door before she knows it. Hands clutching her face, threatening to tear her eyeballs out. *Wouldn't it be better? Wouldn't it save everyone the pain of having to look into these hideous abominations of mine? And painless. So painless -*

Slowly, she feels hands.

Soft. Rough.

Gentle. Calloused.

They're clutching hers. Cold. Warm.

With almost frightening kindness, Aya's hands carefully unmask the brunette's face from her hands, laying them down on her side. Hatate doesn't dare open her eyes, head facing down stubbornly. She's afraid of what she'll see. Afraid of seeing Aya and seeing that she can't possibly deserve the reporter.

"Hatate... hey-"

The softest of voices.

"Can you... open your eyes? I don't... really care if you don't talk. To me, anyway. I just... your eyes tell me a lot already, you know? So, like... please look at me."

The brunette lets out a shuddering, shaky sigh. With trembling fingers, she intertwines them with Aya's, not caring if she's being horrifically selfish for even thinking of the act, and blinks back tears from her brown eyes.

With her free hand, Aya tilts the brunette's chin upwards to match her gaze. Hatate looks over at the reporter like a scared, cornered animal, unable to attack nor flee. Resigned. Accepted its fate. And that's what terrifies both of them.

Their foreheads meet. Aya closes her own ruby eyes, sighing the smallest sigh ever, as if relieved. Hatate doesn't dare move, eyes

fixated on the reporter's slightly parted lips. *'I'm so close. So close. What if I move, just - just the tiniest bit, I mean- '*

She's being selfish.

She realizes that.

Hatate draws away, further back until her spine is ramrod-straight, not daring to look back at Aya's face. It only makes the burning feeling in her stronger and more painful.

*Click* . The lock on her door. Then a shuffling sound, and a warm body pressed against hers. Their fingers never separate. A hushed voice -

"Your eyes are pretty. I've told you that, right?"

The brunette curls up tighter. Eyes shut tight. With a scratchy, almost hissing voice;

"I wish... you were as much a liar... as you are beautiful."

---

The two of them don't speak for another thirty minutes. Hatate thinks she fell asleep somewhere in that timeframe, but her memory of those thirty minutes and fifty three seconds is hazy at best. She remembers the cold, of course, and the headaches that came along with it, but that's only normal. Her fever is still going strong. It surprises her that she hasn't completely collapsed in the past few minutes, really.

On the thirty-first minute, Aya's eyes flicker over to Hatate. The brunette responds with an inquisitive, if tired, look. The reporter's lips twist into a small, quiet smile. "I need to go."

*'Please don't,* ' Hatate wants to say, but then again, that wouldn't do much. She nods, weakly, her vision blurring and sharpening at random intervals, the pounding in her head growing stronger. It's

almost like she crumbles without Aya's presence, which is true, to an extent.

Aya's smile grows in reassurance, *everything's going to be fine, you're going to be okay, I'll visit you again tomorrow*. She moves to position herself on her knees and presses her lips against Hatate's forehead, before straightening, retrieving all of her things excluding the notes, and exits the room silently. Hatate doesn't move, the tingle on the spot right where Aya had touched her still present.

There is a sound of a door, much more distant, opening and closing with little other noise. Good. Only then does the brunette allow herself to sink into a little hole and to breathe through her mouth, because her lungs feel like they're constricting themselves and her blood is blocking her nostrils. Good God, she tells herself, you've never been this way before, and now you're all over some girl you met just a few weeks ago?

*'But it's not just some girl, it's Aya, '* she wants to argue, but realizes that really, it's true, Aya is just some girl, and Hatate is just some girl, and really, they're all just some people in just some planet in just some galaxy. It doesn't matter. They're all insignificant, but Hatate even more so. The brunette's breath wavers, but the tears don't come, just the feeling, which isn't any better, if worse.

What's worst - she spoke. She *used her voice*. It was bad when Aya had to hear her pathetic excuse of a voice when she talked to her mother, but when she had specifically spoken to *her*, to Aya with this desert-dry cardboard voice? Her fists clench, voices berate her for bothering, for even *trying*, for even *thinking* of it, and oh, Lord, why does it have to be this way -

It's these times where Aya Shameimaru is really, very important.

Hatate crawls over to her bed, wraps herself in blankets upon blankets, and succumbs to sleep. Her last thought is a wish to die very quickly in the never-ending darkness.

---

Of course, she lived.

The next day, she's still feeling none the better, and so she decides to actually take her temperature because God knows when she'll get better. Hatate does her daily morning ritual, attempts to change into proper clothes but fails and just shrugs on an extra long sweatshirt and pajama shorts, and scours the house for a thermometer. She eventually finds one buried deep under a mound of things in a drawer, which she dutifully cleans.

Her mother is out today as well, though the brunette hadn't heard her exit the house, most likely due to her sleep, which was comparable to that of a hibernating animal. Her temperature, though, is at a not-quite-healthy-yet 38.4, and so Hatate drags herself back into her room with her newfound thermometer and flops uselessly on her bed.

If anything, it gives her time to think. She doesn't like it, but when she can't muster the strength to move over to her table and write, she's going to have to think.

*"Your eyes are pretty."*

No, they aren't. They're abhorrent. Hatate covers her face with her pillow and tries not to envision Aya's precious face. See, she tells herself, this is why I shouldn't be left alone with nothing to do. The first thing I go to is always going to be Aya, whether I'm writing, or thinking, or whatever else.

*'And she kissed me.'*

*'...'*

*'... Well. Not really. But it was a kiss on the forehead. That's kind of serious. What the hell am I supposed to do with that now? I can't just say 'oh, cool' and brush it off like it was nothing. I'm a parasite and she bothered to give me her attention. What on earth am I supposed to repay that with?'*

It took Hatate a few more minutes before she managed to gather the strength to trudge over to her wall, covered with Post-It Notes. Aya had taken the liberty of sticking a few more yesterday once again, since some were dated with 9/17/14 . She takes the easiest-looking one (*Rumors about yuki-onna in preschool area* ) and starts scrawling down the news once more.

This time around, it takes a few more seconds for her to recognize the door opening and closing in a strange, unfamiliar way, because the door is actually closed this time, not slammed. Hatate peers out of her door to hear footsteps and a certain reporter's head popping up from the staircase. "Good morning, Hatatan! Are you feeling better?"

The brunette manages a smile, a weak one, and opens the door a little wider for Aya. Her legs buckle, which is only a surefire sign that she is most certainly not getting any better, and so she quickly takes a seat by her study table, the half-written sheet of paper hidden by the notebook Aya had left the day before. After setting down more notes for Hatate, Aya quickly sticks some more colored paper on the wall, a cheery smile the whole way. "I got you some medicine, so your recovery should be a bit speedier this time around."

'... *Medicine?* ' Hatate blinks. Brown eyes glimmer in confusion.

Noticing this, Aya turns around to look at the brunette properly and digs something out of her bag. The rustling of plastic is evident as she brings out a small bottle with liquid of some sort, and another bottle with capsules in it. "I wasn't sure whether you liked liquid or capsule, so I just got both. It's no big deal, Eientei sells this stuff pretty cheap anyway."

(Hatate remembers - she frequents Eientei for its medicines. She only ever buys some when it's really bad, because the cold medicine in there costs nearly double the usual price in a typical pharmacy. The last time she checked, which was about a year ago, fever medicine and such cost about as much as her tuition fee for school.)

The brunette hesitates before taking the bottles, setting both on her table with a nod. She looks up - a silent *thank you*, which she hopes Aya gets. Judging by the gleeful look on the reporter's face, she certainly had.

"Don't bother paying me back, by the way, it's not like I really need the money," the reporter laughs, waving a hand in the air nonchalantly.

Hatate blinks - "*So you're rich?* "

"Well, yeah, I've got money, I guess." Aya shrugs. "It's no big deal. By the way, nice pajamas."

The brunette flushes in embarrassment, hurrying away into her bathroom to change into something vaguely acceptable. Once she slams the door closed, though, a stupid little smile pops into existence on her face as she thinks, *Aya bought medicine for me, they're like gifts from her, she cares about me enough to buy things with me in mind...*

When she comes out in a blouse and jean shorts, Aya's cheerfully sticking notes on her wall. It looks like there's a lot of news today, from the short time Aya had been in school... what?

Hatate's sudden jolt catches Aya's attention, as the reporter turns to look at her with a confused smile. How does that even work? Well, it's still cute on her, so whatever. "What is it?"

"I..." she manages to croak out, before immediately shutting her mouth again. It was bad enough when Aya had to hear her speak yesterday - it'd probably be even worse this time. Hatate shakes her head before gesturing towards the notes. Brown eyes swim in bewilderment. "*Where did these...?* "

It takes a little while for Aya to catch on, but she eventually gets the idea. "Um, well, I've been cutting classes for a little to hang out with you and everything... you know? Every time it's Chemistry going on,

I sneak out to get you the homework from the day before and also from the short time I've been in school. Ah, I also went ahead to Eientei to get you the medicine while on my way here, so..." She trails off, seemingly unable to continue.

Hatate nods numbly. *'She cares enough for me to cut classes for a subject she's failing. Aya is... doing this... for me. I... '*

A dizzying sensation overcomes her. She stumbles slightly, her hands clutching her head. *'Of all times- '*

A yelp of surprise; a pair of hands (*rough and calloused and everything in between*) on her shoulders; her bed underneath her. A blanket. Then a voice, Aya's; "Rest a while, alright? I'll stay right here, Hata..."

The brunette shudders, curling up into a ball. She *hates* fevers.

# my heartbeat slows to match yours

## Chapter 6: my heartbeat slows to match yours

---

There was insufficient faith. Aya momentarily freaks, Hatate 'comforts', and after that, there are two visits in quick succession to the Himekaidou household. One of them isn't good.

---

*'How long has it been? Two days? No, three. Three sick days.'*  
Hatate blinks. *'Maybe I should go today. I don't feel that bad-'*

A headache springs up. The brunette scowls, pushing the pain back down as far as it can go. *'Of course. Headaches at four in the morning. Absolutely, totally natural.'*

It is, quite frankly, four thirty two in the morning. Hatate has only been awake for a few minutes, contemplating a few things, such as what she should write about in the next article (well, she *could* do the one about the Grim Reaper by the swimming pool, but she always gets spooked about supernatural things like that), when she figured she hasn't done any of her homework yet, which in turn led to her train of thought speeding to school and her attendance.

Three days. She's only started attending school a month or two ago, but three days seems like a heavy impact upon her record. With a sigh, the brunette props herself up on her bed. She supposes she'll head to school at six. Nothing could possibly go wrong. With the two remaining hours she has left...

Hatate drags herself over to her table. She finishes up the *yuki-onna* rumors with a nice little sentence at the end, then moves on to the Grim Reaper rumors. (She's been doing a lot of rumors lately - then again, it doesn't matter much, since she much likes playing with things not set in stone rather than concrete facts.) The brunette



scribbles down vague notes and, realizing her writing isn't going anywhere, scraps the sheet of paper and decides that the one about the Student Council President going bonkers over a balance scale mysteriously appearing in her room sounds much better.

She almost falls asleep quite a number of times - thankfully, she catches herself before she nods off and finishes the article as well. It's short, but hopefully sweet, and it's not like there's much to the article besides confusion and a bit of speculation. And maybe something to do with the Grim Reaper from the pool? Some of the rumors being traded around the school did mention something about the President and the supposed Grim Reaper were often seen 'together'...

Hatate pauses, then does a double-take on the sticky note Aya left yesterday. Is... Is the reporter serious? Well, these rumors *had* come with a hefty price (such as 150 yen down the drain), so she supposes they have a grain of truth to them... oh, who is she kidding? She's only distracting herself from thoughts of Aya as much as possible... which, admittedly, is working rather well. Good. Keep it that way. After all, these articles were of a more pressing matter, even though the distribution date is still a little over a month from now. Well, it never hurt anyone to be prepared.

Anyway, a quick glance at the clock tells her it's already five forty, so she packs up, rearranges her bag to accommodate some of her new notes, then makes herself a bento in the kitchen. Hatate can't hear anything from her mother's room, but just in case, she heats some leftover Chinese takeout from last night. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she heads back up the stairs to her room to down some of the pills Aya had bought her. Brown eyes stare at the bottle in her hands.

*'She... really... bought this for me... '*

She pockets the bottle and makes her way out the door.

---

As she thought - literally nobody except Nitori Kawashiro, the asthmatic library girl, and a few teachers is in school yet.

Nitori isn't a problem - she barely twitches in her sleep when the door to the classroom slides open and Hatate tiptoes inside. She sets her bag down beside her in her usual seat, then shuffles through the content to finalize some aspects of the latest article, just in case there are errors she might have missed the last time. (Really, she's just looking for something to do that isn't related to Aya. That is, *directly* related to Aya.)

Once seven thirty rolls around, a few more students start trickling in, soon expanding into groups chatting amiably with one another. Hatate knows Aya doesn't come in until five minutes before the bell, so she just keeps her head down, ignores the stares and whispers she hears around her. (But, oh, *God*, does it hurt.) She picks up a pencil and her hand starts flying - she's not even really, totally sure what she's writing about, but it only serves as a distraction. It doesn't have to make sense.

The only thing that breaks her out of her writing is a loud crash and further noises of a skirmish just outside the classroom. Several students are crowding around the door, gawking at the scene - Hatate spies quite a few people using their phones to take a video of what's happening. (She supposes it's for that geeky YouTube channel run by some shameless students in the school, but as she hasn't the slightest clue on what they do there, she doesn't bother learning more about it.) Hatate lets a rather uncharacteristic smirk flash on her face for a few moments - it's the few times she can really let her few skills loose. The brunette digs her yellow-checkered phone out of her blouse pocket and lets her fingers dance across the keypad.

A few seconds later, she has access to the person with the best view of the scene outside - her hacking skills might have gotten a little rusty, what with the newspaper club, but they're doubtless still working perfectly. She hunkers down and watches the scene unfold - and she can't lie that her blood doesn't boil at the sight.

The first thing she notices is, of course, Aya's presence. She has a few bruises on her, but it's nothing Hatate hasn't gotten used to. The thing that stands out from her usual appearance is her expression. Distraught.

The screen's shaking so much it's hard to tell what's really going on, but the brunette focuses as best as she can on what she can see. A short blonde girl with a wide-brimmed cream hat and baggy clothing is busy tearing... tearing *something* apart. It seems to be paper, judging by how fast and how easily she's ripping it, but it could also be another material. It takes her a little while to notice, but there's also a woman with intense blue hair beside the blonde, her arms folded against her sizeable chest and saying something harshly to Aya, an... irritated expression on her face. Is she just a little irritated or plain mad? Probably mad, seeing Aya's look.

Finally, the blonde finishes her job of tearing whatever-it-is apart and dusts her hands, even if it isn't like she had gotten anything on them anyway. The woman says something else, probably like a finishing statement, then takes the blonde's hand in her own and leads her away from the screen. That leaves Aya, who simply looks blank, then moves to-

The screen cuts to black. The brunette narrows her eyes, then hacks out of the person's phone to return to hers. A quick check reveals nothing changed, so she pockets her phone and quickly makes her way out the classroom. The horde of people seems to have started dispersing already, making it much easier to maneuver. Her breath still hitches when she accidentally touches someone, but the constant reminder of *Aya is near Aya is near* in her mind calms her somewhat.

Though this time, it looks like the reporter is the one to be calmed.

Aya's kneeling down by the torn scraps of material, picking them up and staring at them vacantly, with just the slightest touch of dejection in her eyes. Nitori is crouching down next to her, whispering a few

phrases Hatate can't make out. The brunette walks closer, still a little unsteady-

Brown eyes flicker.

It's paper. Torn paper.

Newspaper.

Hatate drops down to her knees wordlessly, scoops the pieces up, and looks over at Aya. She doesn't seem very surprised at the brunette's sudden appearance, but clearly confused on why said brunette is currently handing the pieces of paper towards her. "Hey, Hata... I, um, sorry for the scene. You don't need to..."

The brunette shakes her head slowly, as if speaking (?) to a child. She gestures at the pieces of paper once more, and the reporter catches the question in her eyes.

"That was... yeah, that was a copy of the latest edition. It's, I mean... you know Sanae?"

---

She tells her about it at lunch.

While Hatate is halfheartedly picking at her bento, Aya says in a hushed voice, "... Sanae Kochiya, the new girl who transferred yesterday... I kind of forgot to tell you about her, but anyway, it's not like she's *that* popular. But anyway - I handed her a copy of the latest edition and a flyer and asked if she wanted to join our club and everything, and she smiled and went all good girl on me and was like, 'I'll think about it' or whatever."

"And, uh. Today I was... I was just walkin' in the hallway, I just got my stuff from my locker, and then... and then those two folks came running in and started ranting to me about how I should do my job better." She let out a forced laugh, and Hatate winces. "Parently, they've gotten Sanae to already go and join Reimu in the shrine

maiden training schmuck they have somewhere, and from the looks of it, they think I'm a bad influence on their daughter. Niece. Whatever." Aya sighs. "I - they gave a bunch of criticism too, which I *guess* isn't too bad, but the worst part's that it's *your* article they're criticizing."

Hatate's heart stops.

"It was the one about Alice, I think. They said it was all too much speculation and that it was revealing too much of her personal life in a public paper. And... And I guess they have a point, but... they also said it was poorly-written, too many grammar mistakes..." Her breath hitches. "I just, I just felt that I wanted to defend you, because I sent the whole paper to the moderators before we officially distributed it, and he said it was perfectly fine, so I just - I just... stood there. I didn't even try to defend you, I couldn't... talk. No matter how much I wanted to. I... I'm sorry. This probably hits a bit too close to home for you." Ruby eyes look over at the brunette, filled with a sort of hopelessness that Hatate had never seen on Aya before. And even though the reporter looks good in *anything*, the brunette decides that hopelessness is not something that is supposed to be there.

She reaches out. Touches Aya's arm. She's not too hurt about the accusations, actually - she takes them to heart, tries to accept the valid criticism, and promises she'll really check over her grammar next time, but the most pressing matter here is Aya. Some article she wrote when she had just started out isn't more important than Aya.

(Not a lot of stuff is more important than Aya by this point, actually. It's almost worrying, but Hatate supposes; what can you do.)

The reporter barely blinks at the action, but she does numbly take the brunette's hand in her own, entwining their fingers together almost absentmindedly, gaze staring into nothing. It's awkward enough that several pairs of eyes are staring at them (*beating down her back, whispering promises of torture, sending searing strings of pain right through her chest*, but Aya is here), but their entangled

fingers can be clearly seen from almost every angle. Hatate flushes bright red, but doesn't pull away. If it's what Aya wants...

"... 'M sorry, Hatatan," Aya murmurs, just loud enough for only the two of them to hear (thank goodness). "Back then, when your mom was going ballistic on me, you stepped in to help, and... and spoke... something you never ever do in front of *anyone*, and then I couldn't even open my mouth to defend *you* against those two." The reporter trembles - it's a low, almost unnoticeable shudder that passes through both girls. "They're not in the fault, it's... it's more of me. I'm sorry. Hatate."

Hatate hesitates, before tightening her grip on Aya's hand and inching just the slightest bit closer. Aya glances over at the blushing brunette, giggles softly, and pulls them closer together to the point that they're pretty much sharing the same body heat. The reporter nestles her head in the crook of Hatate's neck (burning bright red, too), mutters something about not sleeping all night, and promptly starts snoring.

The bell rings about ten minutes later. Hatate (reluctantly) wakes the reporter up, and leads Aya's groggy self up the stairs to their classroom.

---

Blue pigtails bounce. "Aww! Look at them, they're so cute!"

"Well, they're getting closer, yes." Momiji blinks. "Maybe they really can pull it off?"

Nitori smiles, but it falters a moment later. "Hatate doesn't talk, does she?" There's no 'much' after 'talk'. It stands to say that Hatate doesn't talk at all. "That... isn't good for a relationship."

"What makes you think they're looking for a relationship?" Momiji asks.

“They’re all... cuddly and stuff,” the blue-haired girl says, shrugging helplessly. “And Aya’s been cutting classes and buying her super-expensive things.”

“That’s medicine. Medicine is always expensive.”

“*Eientei* medicine?”

“... Nitori, I think we have a problem.”

---

“Class dismissed, everyone. Make sure to read pages one hundred and...”

Most of the class is already out the door before the teacher can finish. He sighs, and starts packing his things up as well. Hatate pauses to write a reminder on the margin of her notebook before she stuffs it back in her bag, her mind not entirely there. She blinks. Is she spacing out? She doesn’t even remember what she’s thinking of, but...

A sheet of paper flutters out of her notebook. Confused, the brunette picks it up and skims over the contents quickly - it’s the paper she wrote on this morning. She blinks, then tries properly reading what she had written.

---

*when i open my mouth*

*a string of words*

*at least, that’s what i wish for*

---

*when she opens her mouth*

*her voice envelopes me and blankets me*

*my unworthy self*

---

*when i look at her*

*there is a word on my tongue*

*but it is so very, very heavy*

---

*when she looks at me*

*i wish there is a word on her tongue*

*but that would be so, so selfish*

---

*when we touch*

*i am only reminded*

*of my nothing in her everything.*

---

It takes her a while, but she eventually crumples up the paper and throws it deep in the trash can - where it (*and its writer*) belongs.

---

The next day is a Saturday, September 20. Hatate wakes up at seven in the morning and knows something is rather off.

Sitting up on her bed, she scans her bedroom for anything that might be out of place or something that makes her uncomfortable, but she's fairly sure the possible threat isn't anywhere in the house. Outside. But that can wait. She thinks.

She undergoes her daily morning routine and slips on a purple blouse and jean shorts before creeping outside. She doesn't even know exactly why she feels so nervous, or apprehensive - but she can *feel* that something is here, or something is outside here, the



place that has been her home for seventeen years. She's not so willing to give it up so easily - even if most of those years have been traumatizing beyond repair. Deadpan brown eyes show exactly how much she bothers with most of her activities.

A look out the window shows nothing. Hatate opens the door a crack and peers out - nothing unusual. Perhaps it's just extra quiet today? Maybe her mother is actually *sleeping*? Or her fever is getting worse. That's a likely explanation.

Her phone vibrates in her pocket. The brunette jolts, nearly hitting her knee on a table, then quickly runs back up into her room before checking the yellow-checkered device.

*1 New Message*

... Who could even be...

*Sender: Aya Shameimaru*

---

*Good morning, Hata! Are you awake? Sanae talked to me on FB and said she's super sorry about the stuff her relatives said. Thought you'd want to know. Also, I might swing by your house later if that's okay. Alert me if your mom is on guard duty again!*

*PS: You better be taking the medicine I bought you.*

Hatate reads the message twice, then sighs. Sanae Kochiya's relatives' words don't hurt as much as the brunette expects, which is probably a good sign. But then, when she seriously thinks about it, it's not her those women were insulting. It's Aya. They had been insulting Aya under the pretense that she had been Hatate. And the thought - the thought that she could have been mistaken for anyone, least of all Aya - makes her sick to the stomach.

She's just a fly. A bug. A pest. Something to be squashed. Or something to be toyed with, to torture until she eventually dies - not

someone to be mistaken for another person that's so much more than anything she could be. The brunette shivers, sinks to sit down against her door - and, *oh*, how her chest *aches* .

After some time, she realizes Aya said she might come over, and Hatate isn't going to let her be greeted by a rampaging mother (if she can be called that) again. The brunette staggers to her feet and heads down to the kitchen to fix something up for both Mrs. Himekaidou and Aya. A headache comes up somewhere in between frying the steak, but she fights it off by downing another pair of pills. She sighs. Her lifestyle is starting to feel almost wrong, though she can't quite pinpoint the reason why.

A plate of spaghetti is set away for her mother, wrapped carefully in plastic on the table; the steak is laid out delicately with some parsley (actually, that reminds her of the girl always being labeled as 'bridge princess', the one with the frightening green eyes) and a serving of rice. It's rather Western, but since she has no idea what Aya eats (*if* Aya even eats meat), she just hopes Western flows well with the reporter. With that, she retreats back into her room, bringing out her phone.

It's been a while since she's been really alone with her best friend. She flips her yellow-checkered phone open and starts scrolling through people's news feeds.

Every few minutes, she glances out the window. The unsettling feeling in her grows.

---

*Sender: Aya Shameimaru*

*I'm at your front door, Hatatan~ welcome me like a good friend, will ya?*

Hatate blinks. She takes a look at the spot where her phone clock is located. It reads eleven thirty in the morning. Oh, good. Almost missed lunch.

With unsteady steps, she makes her way over to the front door. A quick glance out the window shows Aya standing by the gate, swaying back and forth patiently. If Hatate opens the door, she's sure she'd hear a tune being hummed by the reporter. '*She's too precious for me...*'

Nonetheless, she cracks the door open and hesitantly widens it inch by inch. Aya, bless her soul, takes notice and smiles widely. "Hata! Good morning... or, afternoon, I think. Hope I'm not being too much of a bother?"

'*You're never a bother,*' the brunette thinks, though she supposes some of her interviewees might be put off. Then again, her cute looks can certainly make up for it. Then she looks up, just an inch or two, and stares almost adoringly at Aya's ruby eyes. Her arm is extending to the reporter before she knows it, palm open as if asking for Aya's hand.

Crimson eyes blink. Then she smiles, and places her hand gently on Hatate's. "Shall we go?"

Hatate 'escorts' the reporter up to her room after she grabs the steak, to which Aya is pleasantly surprised at - she's rather partial to steak, judging by the way she devours the food like it's nothing. Hatate doesn't bother with herself and simply nibbles on a sandwich that's lived in the corner of the fridge for who-knows-how-long. Ah, well.

"Way better than the stuff in the cafeteria," Aya manages to exclaim in between swallows. She flashes a grin, and even the small pieces of meat stuck to her teeth are endearing to the brunette. "Also, Hata, you look so depressed with your sandwich... want some?" The reporter offers Hatate a spoonful of meat and rice, to which the brunette flushes red. "Don't worry, I promise I won't choke you with the spoon or anything... well, not on purpose, anyway."

Quivering, Hatate inches closer, hands suddenly not knowing where to go. She decides on placing them on her lap respectfully, once her

half-eaten sandwich is on the plate next to her, as Aya had opted to sit on the floor while Hatate sits a bit uncomfortably on the edge of her bed. Aya giggles slightly and extends her arm to spoon-feed the brunette Western food. “Gotta eat your own cooking, and all! Oh, wait, *is* this your cooking?” Aya peers down at the food as if it holds the answers. “It does have a kinda Hatatan-feeling to it.”

The brunette chews slowly, turning away and trying not to look as embarrassed as she feels. Spoon-feeding? Couples do that sometimes, don’t they? Embarrassing, embarrassing, embarrassing...

After that, Aya insists on bringing her plate down to the sink instead of having Hatate do it, so the brunette trails after the reporter rather reluctantly while she goes on about some of the recent happenings on the school group on Facebook. Apparently, there had been a dispute about whether or not the Student Council President is really in a relationship or not, and with who. Before the President herself had come in the conversation, many members speculated it to be the rumored Grim Reaper, which only made Aya break into a fit of giggles and Hatate to crack a small smile.

And it’s not until Aya pauses in her story-telling that Hatate hears the sirens. Police sirens. Getting louder and louder and, oh, God, there’s knocking on the door.

Aya goes silent. Hatate hunkers down, waits if her mother will come down. She doesn’t. A gruff voice; “Hilda Himekaidou? Open the door or we will enter with force.”

Oh, God, what did her mother do? Did the police find out about the drug-dealing? Is she a suspect in a case that Hatate hopes to Hell and Heaven that she isn’t involved in? And, God, *why* does it have to happen now?

“I, uh, think you should answer that,” Aya whispers. There’s no real need for whispering, since they’re separated by quite a few walls, but it never hurts to be safe.

Hatate swallows. She nods, numbly. She purposely lingers in front of the door when they get there, to see if her mother will come down, but she doesn't. A frail hand grasps the doorknob - just barely. Twists it. Pulls it.

A tall man with an intimidating exterior stands in front of the duo. He looks down at Hatate, looks down at the shaking brunette, and raises an eyebrow. "Girl, who are... are you Hatate Himekaidou?"

Her shivers intensify. God, she can't do this. It *hurts* . Not even Aya's presence helps, and that's the worst thing. What's *happening*?

Then, a voice, much like the singing of the angelic choir; "Yes, she is."

"And you?"

"I'm, uh, Aya Shameimaru... sir. I'm visiting her. As a friend from school."

The man nods, then looks down at Hatate. "Bring your mother down, will you? We have some things to talk about with her."

Knees knocking. Legs wobbling. Breath hitching. Something isn't *right* .

"We'll... do that, then, sir. But to be safe, can you... not come with us? My, uh, my friend here - she's not good with people."

"That's an understatement." But even as the voice gets softer and Hatate can feel herself being gently led away by Aya, her shaking only gets worse. This isn't right. This isn't *right* .

"Hatate," Aya whispers, so soft, so delicate, "You need to tell me where your mom is. Please. So we can end this already, okay? Can you do it for me?"

The brunette steadies herself as best as she can, trying not to think about what could happen with her mother and the police officers.

She only realizes she's practically crushing Aya's hand in her grip when she starts walking, and immediately lets go. Brown eyes flicker upwards hesitantly to face a warm, reassuring smile - and a rough, calloused hand is clutching hers.

Hatate bites her bottom lip and makes her way to her mother's room. She can't be sure if the woman is in the house at the moment, but...

She opens the door.

A stench flows out.

Oh, God.

# when we both fall down and don't hit the bottom

Chapter 7: when we both fall down and don't hit the bottom

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A murder case is investigated.

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Trigger Warnings: suicide, (mentions of) self-harm

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(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Tired eyes stare at the crumpled note in her hands. “And this is supposed to be... what?”

Suwako looks up from her desk, if momentarily. “That’s the note she left for her kid, Kana.”

Kanako gives the sheet of paper a quick scan - it’s not too long, and not very interesting either, but a deeper read into it might prove useful. “Alright. Found any information about this family’s history yet?”

The blonde’s forehead scrunches up, as it has been for quite a while. “Pretty weird. All we’ve got is that this woman’s husband is a player, aight. Married to two ladies, he is.”

“What, so there’s Himekaidou, and the other...?”

“Haven’t exactly gotten to the part yet. We’re on it, though - I’ll tell you once we’ve got our list.”

“Sounds good.” Kanako glances down at the paper once more - she’s still not quite sure what to do with it. It’s technically evidence, after all. Even so, she gives it a read-through - never hurts to be more prepared. The writing is sloppy, as if whoever wrote this had been in some sort of rush.

---

*Hatate,*

*I’m telling you now - don’t mourn for me. I’m not worth it. All I gotta say if you ever ask why is that your dad caught up to me. I’m pretty sure the police found out and are coming this very minute, which is why I’m doing this. Find out the truth for yourself, if you can handle it.*

*Mom Hilda*

*PS: Hey, police bitches - the house and everything in it is given to my kid. If I can call her that.*

---

She idly notes the messy strike through ‘mom’; now if she can just get a verbal testimony from that Hatate kid, it’d prove the theory of ‘abusive mother’. But then there’s always that damned Shameimaru always acting as some sort of speaker for her, and to be frank, Kanako’s quite sick of it. Can’t the brunette talk? If it’s for the sake of this God-be-damned murder case, she’d damn well resort to questionable methods.

Mentally, she shakes her head. Murder case. The case had been closed years ago - but only now did little Sanae decide to open it up and investigate it herself. Stupid girl... Kanako casts a glance at the blonde by her desk briefly, wondering if she should bring it up. Suwako only knows that the case had suddenly been opened and that someone had found a more-than-likely suspect.

Ah, well. Sanae would tell her herself... probably. Kanako places the paper back on Suwako’s desk and makes her way out of her office,



bidding her goodbye. The blonde doesn't reply, but Kanako's all too used to it.

Now, she thinks, as she shrugs out of her jacket, it's time for a little investigation.

---

It happened all so *suddenly* . She hadn't even been able to react accordingly until Aya gasped, pulled her back out of sight from the... the *body*, and then dragged her back downstairs to the police. And Hatate had stayed numb the whole time, just barely managing to comprehend the scene that she had saw for all of two seconds.

It was all too *much* .

The police had marched up the stairs the moment Aya had stuttered something out - for once, Hatate hadn't been paying attention. Everything had been just dull background noise in her ears. It was so... so... she couldn't describe it.

Aya had shakily sat her down on the nearest chair, still wide-eyed. She still couldn't blink, or move, or do *anything* useful, all she could see was the *creak, creak* of the swinging, of the body, of *her* -

"Hata-"

The brunette's breath had hitched, her heart skipping a few beats, she remembers. '*Aya. Oh, God, Aya, what's she going to say-* '

"Hatate, I... I'm, I'm so *sorry*, I just... I didn't-"

Numbly, Hatate shook her head. It's one of the hardest little movements she's ever made, but then again, everything had taken so much effort that she could barely tell the difference between everything. From the corner of her eye, she could see Aya going motionless, facing straight ahead.

A hand (rough and calloused and *God*, it's just what she needs) had reached out for hers. Hatate didn't refuse, but didn't react, either. Not because she hadn't wanted it - quite the opposite - but because she just couldn't bring herself to.

Their fingers intertwined, and at that moment, that very moment, Hatate had thought, *since everyone's gone, what if I disappear, too?* And she looked beside her, at the enigma named Aya Shameimaru, and decided she could afford to disappear a little later.

If only.

---

The body had been freaky, to say the least.

After she'd successfully put Hatate back to sleep in her bed, Aya had quietly made her way to the brunette's mother's room. The body was still there for investigation - and it hadn't been very long since the police had started looking through it, after all. She took the liberty of scouring the area and trying not to throw up at the sight of the still, limp corpse.

The motionless chest had been disconcerting. The face, stuck in that everlasting blank, empty expression - now that had been downright terrifying. Aya kept her eyes as low as possible to avoid glancing up and staring at something she didn't want to see.

The police officers were all inspecting things like drawers and closets, but Aya was only rather interested in exactly *why* Mrs. Himekaidou had decided to do something like... like that. She had a daughter (a *lovely* one) to take care of, and a husband to love - or, wait, did she?

Aya had never actually seen another male in the household aside from the police officers. No Mr. Himekaidou for this one, it looked. She supposed she was similar to the Himekaidou family in that aspect - no father, supposedly disappeared in the middle of a

business trip, according to dear old mother. She didn't want to question it now, but...

No, no. Focus on the task at hand, not on memories long gone.

She checks around the tables first, see if there's anything suspicious in them, but evidently not, as they're all stripped bare by the officers. And though she's gone unnoticed by most of the police in the room due to the similarity in outfits, one of them had immediately noticed her when she moved closer to the body. She had a rather unusual hairstyle, but not bad.

"Excuse me - do you have business with this woman?" She cocked her head a little, and Aya noticed that she looked barely older than twenty. If she squinted, she could see a shiny little nametag there - *Kagiyama* .

Aya nodded quickly. "I'm her daughter's friend." If she could say she was her 'best' friend, that would certainly add to her argument, but she couldn't exactly be sure about Hatate's relationships. "And, I... she told me she wanted to know what was happening, so I went here to take a look."

Kagiyama, or whatever her first name is, smiles. "I'm sorry, but only family is allowed. Leave as soon as you can before anyone notices you're a little out of place. I'll pretend I didn't see you." With that, she pointedly averts her gaze and pretends to empty out an already-empty drawer. Aya spares a little simper, before glancing at the body (God, it's horrid, why did this have to *happen*, and to *Hatate* of all people) and scampering back out.

---

"I have news," Suwako drones. "You know, I don't think I like working on this murder case."

"Yeah, neither do I," Kanako replies, snark lining her voice like poison. Then she actually hears Suwako's first statement, and her

head swivels with alarming speed towards her partner. "Wait, *news*? You're serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious." The blonde squints at her computer screen, then redirects her attention at the files next to her keyboard. "Lessee. Himekaidou's husband, he was married to this nice lady first and had a kid with her. Then he went on a business trip to America from Japan, met Himekaidou there, fell in love and got married... again. Had a kid, *again*. Then when the time came around to leave, he..." She trails off, before she shakes her head and sighs. "Yeah, that's all I've got. This Google search is seriously leading nowhere."

"A business trip to America," Kanako murmurs. "If Himekaidou's in here, in Japan now, then did she move here with her kid or something after that guy did... whatever?"

"Looks like it." Suwako takes a long sip from her coffee. "Anyway, I can't find a whole lotta records about this guy, but it looks like he's..." Her voice trails off. Then she squints at her screen, as if all the answers to the universe is there. "Hey, Kana..."

Kanako perks up. "Mhm? Something wrong?" She scoots over with her swivel chair to peek over Suwako's shoulder, but the blonde looks back at her partner with wide eyes.

"Kana, that other kid with Himekaidou..."

"Shameimaru?" Kanako arches an eyebrow. "What about her?"

"Does she have a dad?" Suwako asks, eyes the size of saucers.

Kanako shrugs. "Well, I wouldn't know-"

"No, this is *important*, come on, Kanako!" Suwako persists. Kanako backs away slightly - the blonde's never been *this* way before, so why would it happen now? Unless...

*Oh, no.* "Suwako, the guy's last name, it can't be-"

Crimson eyes find their way onto the computer screen. A man's face, and a name: *Soichiro Shameimaru* .

---

When Hatate wakes up, it's all just a blur of colors at first.

Her thoughts are muddled, her head numb, eyes blank - she can't *think* of anything. Hell, she can't even feel frustration, or anger, or sadness, or whatever it is she's supposed to be feeling. Her mother just... just *killed* herself. A shuddering breath runs through her curled-up body; it's the first reaction at what's happened since she woke up.

Out of habit, she runs her hand through her hair, and belatedly notices it's untied and flowing loosely off her shoulders. Combing her long, brown hair has never been a favorite pastime of the brunette's, but it's certainly something to kill time with. Shakily pushing herself off her bed, she heads over to her study table, where she remembers the last place her comb had been was next to the finished articles. It's not there when she looks for it, so she abruptly gives up and settles down on the chair.

*Mother is dead.*

A low sound escapes her lips. It's the closest thing to a sob she can manage right now. She's all alone in her room - without Aya or even the police officers - and, oh, she's sure, she's so *sure* that Aya had been scared off by her mother ('s *body* ) that she's going to refuse knowing Hatate altogether. She's going to kick her off the club, she knows it, pretends she doesn't know she exists-

*Knock. Knock.* "Hatate? Are you okay?"

Her breath hitches. Her eyelids flutter shut. "Why do you come back?" she screams - *God, this is the loudest I've ever spoken in such a long time, why am I doing this to Aya? Why am I doing this to myself? Why do I have to subject her to my voice each and every time?* "Why do you keep coming back and - and *caring*? I'm not - I'm

not *worthy* . You're too *nice* . It hurts. It *hurts* . Don't you know that? It hurts a lot! *Why does it hurt?!* ”

The brunette curls up into a ball and breathes in deeply, trying to stabilize her shaking frame, but *God* is it hard. *Why do I have to feel? Why do I have to be subjected to this kind of torture, this loathing? It hurts, it hurts...*

“I’m sorry, Hatate,” a soft voice calls from outside, muffled by the door. She lifts her head, brown eyes gleaming with tears. “I’m sorry I care for you and want you to be... to be okay. It hurts for me, too, you know? You’re one of my... my best friends, if that’s okay, and I don’t want you to be like this. You... don’t deserve it. You’ve been nothing but horribly nice, and... and you were the only other person to join the Newspaper Club... and that means a lot to me. I guess it’s just because I don’t *want* to see you be hurt that I have to be hurt, too.”

Then the heavy silence continues, broken only occasionally by long, soft whines from the shivering wreck that is Hatate Himekaidou. She faintly hears the door click open, a pair of arms wrap around her body, and a chin resting on her shoulder. A whisper;

“I’m sorry. I’ll hold you for as long as it takes, okay?”

The brunette doesn’t respond. She buries her head deeper into her chest, tears spilling down without her meaning to, and she eventually falls asleep.

*What if I disappear, too...?*

---

Kanako barges in the house for about the third time in the past week.

Hina is the one looking over the place of death today, accompanied by two sisters who are in charge of clearing out everything else that hadn’t already been cleared the other day. The Himekaidou kid is still sulking in her bedroom, though it’s not like Kanako can blame her.

Even if her mother had been kind of a bitch, from what Kanako had read.

“Is that Shameimaru kid still here?” she barks, to which both the Aki sisters jump at. Pansies.

Hina coughs. “She left for school, ma’am. Today is Monday, remember?”

Fuck. She’d thought today’s Sunday. Well, whatever. “Get her for me, will you? She studies in that rich-ass school just five minutes from here. Make it fast!”

Hina bows obediently and instructs the two sisters to guard over the area while she’s gone, then exits the room. Kanako gives a long, exasperated sigh and heads back out to the living room and takes a seat by the dining table. A quick glance at it shows that it’s actually filled with dust - looks like none of the inhabitants had used the table until recently, evident by the small patch of cleanness just near where she sits.

Just proves how much this family loves each other, she thinks grumpily.

It takes about twenty minutes for Aya and Hina to return to the house. By that time, Kanako’s nearly melting in her seat out of both boredom, anticipation, and irritation, so when she sees the front door opening and a nervous reporter peering in, she stands up fast enough for her chair to clatter to the floor. She doesn’t bother fixing it.

“You!” She points at Aya, who looks extremely unsure about the situation. “We have a discussion to discuss. Kagiya, back to your station, keep those sisters under control.” Her eyes follow Hina gracefully make her way back up to the room, and when she hears a door click shut, she turns to look over at the sweating reporter. “Now, it’s time for an interrogation.”

“W-What’s this about?” Aya stammers. Ooh, nervous little chick, is she. It’ll only make this more fun, Kanako supposes.

“I’m a police officer investigating this murder case. Now, your father,” Kanako practically spits. Her patience had taken a toll earlier, and she’s in no status to be calm right now. Suwako’s depending on her, after all. “What is his name, and is he present right now?”

“Soichiro Shameimaru.” Aya gulps. “And... no, he disappeared when he went on a business trip, my mom said.”

“And who is your mother?”

Aya takes a deep breath and exhales, doing this slowly all the while, only making the twitch in Kanako’s eye more prominent. “Makiko Shameimaru. Why are you asking-”

“Don’t question a police officer, kid. And don’t forget that I’m still a little pissed at you for that shitty article you wrote.” Kanako’s eyes narrow. Aya winces; good. She needs to learn how to write without invading so much of one’s privacy, after all. “You said your dad - ahem, father disappeared on a business trip. Where was that?”

“... America.”

“Don’t hesitate when talking to me, either.” The officer sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. “Okay. So. Soichiro Shameimaru went on a business trip to America and disappeared. Do you have any idea what he did there, who he was acquainted with, and how long he was supposed to be there?”

Aya pauses, a look of confusion passing through her features. Great, so she doesn’t know. Just as Kanako is about to blow a fuse and ask her to bring her to her mother, her mouth opens. “He was supposed to help out in the local newspaper publishing place in Chicago, if I’m not wrong. I don’t know who he was with, but he was supposed to be there for about two months before he was to come back.”



A pause. Great. "Alright, kid, I'm gonna need you to bring your friend out of her sulking. I've got questions to ask her, and I'm not in the mood for waiting."

Aya blinks. "Hatatan - er, Hatate? But she's-"

"Bring. Her. Now." Kanako grits her teeth. She could get out vital information from that kid, and she needs it now. If she lets it go, she may never get another chance at this again. "I don't care how you do it, but you get her out right this instant. This is *important*."

The reporter's face morphs into a scowl, but she forces a strained nod and gets up to walk over to where Hatate's room is. Kanako sighs and bends down to fix the chair back up to sit on it. This is going to be a slightly longer visit than she intended, it looks.

---

God, Aya never thought it would be so nerve-wracking to enter the room of her best friend.

Apparently, the woman who had told her off just a few days ago turned out to be a police officer investigating the murder case of Hatate's mother. What a coincidence, she thinks bitterly, that she's also a massive jerk. Who would willingly drag a teenager whose mother had just committed suicide? Clearly the person just a floor below her.

With a sigh, she raps her knuckles against the door lightly. No going around it now - it is a murder case, after all, and Hatate deserves to know the truth as to why her mother had gone and offed herself, if anything. She doesn't hear Hatate this time, so Aya hazards a "I'm coming in", and slowly opens the door.

Hatate is by her desk, head on the table as she dozes and hand halfheartedly clutching a pencil. There are several many sheets of paper on the table and the surrounding area, and the trash can next to her is practically overflowing with crumpled balls of paper. There's a distinct scent, too, like dried blood, but...

The reporter spies what looks like a stained boxcutter not too far away from the trash can surrounded by small splotches of blood. She looks back up at Hatate's arms, which are now covered in elbow-length gloves with curious dark stains on it. That can't be good.

Though she *knows* she shouldn't be doing this, Aya heads over and glances down at the papers on Hatate's desk. By the looks of it, she had been writing and writing until she'd fallen asleep, but the subject of her writing doesn't look to be articles...

The reporter eases a paper out from under her head. It's covered in large, messy lines that strike through and cover the words, but Aya deciphers it with ease. Bonuses from being a reporter who all too frequently writes messily as well.

---

*once uPON A Tlme*

*there was a Box*

*and it always rained*

*around the Box.*

*so the boX*

*was pierced thru*

*by a teardrop*

*and the box cried*

*at the hole in it s heart*

---

Another paper, a little cleaner but horrifically crumpled and torn at the edge, read,

---

*at times she would wonder*

*if all this is truly worth the trouble she goes through.*

*she remembers the cries and the screams during the night*

*when she is all alone and only the monsters are there to keep her company.*

*she remembers the shine of sweat when she wakes up at night*

*wailing at the creatures in her head.*

*and she remembers the sins she so sweetly committed*

*when no one was around to watch but everyone.*

---

*at times she would wonder*

*if anyone ever really cares.*

*she remembers the voices that trip her up and refuse to help*

*and when her tears turn into swords against her.*

*she remembers when the light and the dark cross paths*

*and sneer together at her with crooked teeth .*

*she remembers the cross at the end of the street*

*filled with her bones and blood that had long since washed away.*

*and she remembers how the snowflakes fell, slowly and gently,*

*only to pierce right through her and make her shriek.*

---

*but the one thing she remembers the most  
is how beautiful the sun is, always shining their light on her  
even though she is just the moon, the one who little care for  
and she sees that the sun is the only one who keeps her there  
who keeps her alive and breathing  
and, at the same time, dead.*

---

*she remembers - she knows that the only thing she will ever be good  
for  
is to die.*

---

“Oh, Hatate,” Aya sighs, setting the paper down and stroking the brunette’s long hair. She didn’t seem to have tied it back in their normal twintails, so Aya admires how she looks like while she can - long and straight and just about shining in the dimly-lit room. And she’s never thought it before, no, she’s always thought Hatate’s cute and kind of pretty but now Aya sees that she’s plain *beautiful* right now, with two dozen crumpled and non-crumpled papers surrounding her and eyebags weighing down her face.

Aya momentarily forgets everything - just for a very short, very quick moment - and focuses on the person that she is so very lucky to have met. She doesn’t even know *why* she’s so happy with Hatate, because at first sight, she’s everything a normal person would hate - never talks (quite literally), sickly, always anxious, and with a nervous streak. But Aya isn’t a normal person, and something just makes her gravitate towards the brunette; be it her appearance or her personality, or just because she feels so sorry for Hatate, she likes her so very much and that’s all that matters to her.

'*Her hair is soft,* ' the reporter thinks to herself, and almost sets about looking for a comb when she remembers Kanako - damned woman. She hates to wake the brunette up, but it's rather important at the moment, especially since the police officer seems to be in a rather irate mood. "Hata? Hatatan? Wake up..."

The brunette mumbles something unintelligible and shifts slightly, eyes still closed. Aya smiles lightly - '*God help me she's too cute for this* ' - and moves to shake her awake a little, when Hatate's peaceful face suddenly scrunches up.

The reporter takes a step back. "H-Hata-"

"No," Hatate hisses. Her voice is dry and throaty, but most of all, it's *scared* . Her brow furrows and she bites down on her lower lip hard enough to draw a thin line of blood. Aya is now very much terrified, if that isn't quite obvious. "No, no, come back, come back..."

Then the brunette jumps, as if shocked by electricity, and that's when she starts screaming. Quick as a flash, Aya's at Hatate's side once more, wrapping her arms around her and whispering *it's okay I'm here it's okay Hata, c'mon, wake up*, until the brunette's eyes jolt open and the screams come to an abrupt stop.

Aya sighs and lays her chin atop Hatate's head. Her hand rubs the brunette's back soothingly, dragging her fingers through her smooth hair calmingly until Hatate's muscles relax. "It's alright," the reporter murmurs, completely forgetting about the (now very impatient) police officer downstairs. "It's alright. Don't worry. I'll... I'll stay with you. I'll protect you." She allows a little smile to creep onto her face. "I promised you I'd protect you, didn't I? I won't break that promise."

She feels small, shaky hands grip her midsection like it's Hatate's lifeline, and the front of her blouse getting damp. Aya presses her lips against the brunette's forehead and doesn't move for another few moments.

Right now, she's comfortable, and Hatate is okay. Everything is fine.

---

if the events don't make sense, here's part of the timeline:

September 21 [Sunday]

-Hatate Scene 1 (initial confusion and fright)

-KanaSuwa Scene 1 (the note)

-Kanako investigates the body and the place of death. (not written, but implied at the end of kanasuwa scene 1)

-When Kanako leaves, Aya Scene 1 (looking around the body). Hina is introduced.

-Hatate Scene 2 (\*tauriel voice\* "why does it hurt")

September 22 [Monday]

-Hatate stays home from school.

-KanaSuwa Scene 2 (soichiro shameimaru)

-Aki Sisters are introduced, Kanako interrogates Aya.

-Aya Scene 2 (hatate)

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# every single hope you and i had shattered

Chapter 8: every single hope you and i had shattered

---

A case is discussed and closed.

---

---

title from in a big country/big country

look the other way if you spy a grammar error i did this at like 11 pm  
#yolo

i added rikako in and made kanasuwa official because #YOLO

trigger warnings: self-harm, mentions of murder with blades.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

She shakes her head immediately. It's no big surprise. The fear is visible in her brown eyes, swimming with confusion and almost what looks like anger, but it's not like Aya can blame her. She's quite angry with Kanako, too, anyway.

"It's okay, I'll speak for you," the reporter starts to say, but the brunette is still shaking her head. Aya pauses, a little confused, as she stares at Hatate. "Um... is it something a little more specific than I'm used to?"

A nod. Then Hatate looks away, much to Aya's surprise. A small, tiny, tiny voice; "You can't."

"W... What do you mean I... can't?"

Hatate shakes her head again, but doesn't elaborate this time. Aya frowns. This won't do. Could it be from her nightmare? Well, her mother did just recently pass away, and...

"Hey, Hata, what if I receive her questions and you answer to me?" the reporter suggests.

Hatate looks up. She blinks. "*Would that be okay?*"

"Sure, it'll be fine, and it might be a little tricky, but maybe if you write some of it down, I can read from it and..." she trails off, a little unsure about it. Is Hatate comfortable about writing as her form of communication? Probably not, but if it's writing *to* Aya, then maybe...

The reporter is, of course, surprised at the small nod the brunette gives. "Wait, really? Alright, that's... um, great!" It's definitely something new... but it is great. She supposes. "Okay, then, just, let me..."

"You're taking way too long in there, aren't you?!" an angered voice shouts from below. "What the hell are you two doing?! Now's not the time for a make-out session! We're trying to figure out a *murder* case, for the love of God!"

Hatate flushes bright red, but Aya only hears the latter part of the loud exclamation. "Murder case? But isn't this just a kind of complicated suicide...?" That does remind her - why *had* the police come to Hatate's house on the same day Mrs. Himekaidou had died, and why had there been investigators all around the suicide scene? Suicides happen all the time in Japan, especially within Aokigahara. How is this one so special?

"I think I have some questions for this lady, too," Aya mutters under her breath, before gently taking the brunette's hand in hers. Hatate looks up at the reporter, almost confused. "Hey, um, Hata. I think... no, I'm sure there's something off about your mother's... your mother's, um, situation. And. I just, I think you'd want to hear about this sort of thing. So, if you can come down with me, and..."



Aya sees the beginnings of a head-shake, and she mentally smacks herself - of course the brunette would be opposed to the idea, she witnessed the scene with Kanako and the other blonde in school, she'd be at least somewhat intimidated by them! Why had she even bothered?

Another look at the brunette shows that she is actually nodding her head.

---

Man, is she *pissed* .

It's not like Kanako *asked* for this job. Mostly, it's for Suwako, and because it'd just feel weird to be sitting around the house all day while her wife went out and did all the work. She's all for relaxing and drinking sake and telling Sanae old wives' stories, but then she'd just feel bad to see Suwako go home after two straight days of staying awake and suitcases hanging under her eyes.

For the first few weeks, months even, maybe, she was fine with it. Sure, getting answers out of stubborn suspects was frustrating as all hell, but it all worked out fine in the end somehow. It always did. And that's where she comes back to: she sure as hell hopes this entire murder case will be figured out by the end of the week or some such.

Soichiro Shameimaru, killed in his flat by a pair of scissors, which were taken out as soon as the police turned their backs. Nobody had ever found out who had killed him, even after a year or two, and so the case was closed. Needless to say, Sanae had wanted to follow in her mothers' footsteps, and decided to snoop around that certain case. About a day after she had reopened the case and directed everyone to the Himekaidou household, she had told Kanako everything, and that she hadn't actually been expecting to find a likely suspect that hadn't already been suspected.

Too bad that suspect was *dead* . And her note: *your dad caught up to me*, what the *hell* was *that* supposed to mean? For the love of Christ, Kanako thought, if it meant that Hilda Himekaidou had been haunted

by the ghost of Soichiro Shameimaru and eventually killed herself from it, then Kanako was going to blow a fucking fuse. This is not a horror story. This is a murder case. And Kanako is going to solve this fucking murder case, or so help her, and everyone who gets in her way.

---

Finally, after, like, what, two hours? The two students come down, one looking vaguely irritated, one with her shoulders hunched. Thank God, she thinks. If they had taken any longer, Kanako would have stomped over to their refrigerator and eaten raw meat or something just to spite them. Or to spite herself - same thing, in the end.

“About time,” she hisses, before clearing her throat and attempting a cordial response. “Let me ask you some very important questions that I demand you fucking answer or I will eat your lettuce.” It does not work. She is not surprised.

“Sorry, but can I ask a few questions of my own?” Aya - *that Goddamn kid who won't stay out of business that isn't hers* - asks. She places a hand over her chest for some reason. Dramatic effect? If she isn't approaching forty, Kanako would have guffawed. “I heard you say ‘murder case’, but this is just a regular suicide, isn't it? Why are you all treating this as so important? If the police really do this for all normal suicides, maybe you should go over to Aokigahara? I wonder if you would be able to stay in there without getting scared by the ghosts?”

Oh, my God, Kanako thinks, her face a blank sheet of stone. This fucking kid. Suwako would be so much better for this job. “This is not an ordinary suicide. Hell, we aren't even investigating this because of the suicide,” - *‘well, of course we aren't, you fucking idiot, why the fuck would we’* - “we're investigating this shit because of the murder Hilda Himekaidou supposedly committed. She's a suspect in a murder case from years ago, and a certain someone just opened it back up, and so we're taking another look at this so we can get that Goddamn case out of the way.” A pause. “Also, who the fuck gave you permission to ask me, *a fucking police officer*, questions?”

“A murder?” the reporter gasps, completely ignoring the rest of Kanako’s speech. Jesus Christ, what she would give for a drink right now. “Mrs. Himekaidou might’ve killed someone. She’s a suspect... for a murder case...” Aya whirls around to face the brunette, who’s shaking like it’s snowing in the house. (Well, it’s not like Kanako can really blame her, especially since people had been talking about her recently deceased mother having possibly committed murder.) “H-Hata, your dad...”

Hatate’s shaking intensifies. Poor kid looks like she’s ready to fold.

“Your dad... he’s never around whenever I visit... is he...”

“He is dead,” comes the mechanical voice from the brunette, her shivering having stopped cold. Not exactly what Kanako had expected from Hatate, but... “He is dead. I never knew him.”

There’s something in the brunette’s dry, throaty, almost croaky voice that scares the police officer - something that reminds her of death and darkness and what-could-have-beens, something that would make someone like her, someone who has faced grisly murder scenes and torn intestines and run-over corpses wince. There is something in Hatate Himekaidou’s voice that is not healthy.

It’s almost like she’s possessed by her mother’s ghost.

As for Aya, well, she’s thoroughly freaked out, that much is certain, as one can observe by the way the reporter’s eyes are bulging wide and her knees are knocking together.

“H-Hatate?”

“He is dead,” Hatate continues, her voice now low and can barely be heard. “Dead and gone. Life drained. Eyes blank. Chest still. Nothing can change that.” Then she rises slightly to look Kanako in the eye, and quite suddenly, their noses are just touching each other by the slightest bit. The brunette’s voice echoes; “Why bother? The answer is clear. I’m sure my mother killed him. Who else would have done

it? Why else would dear mother treat me like this for the past seventeen years? If I were not born, perhaps father would still be alive.” She tilts her head at a near ninety-degree angle, which Kanako is *sure* is impossible by human standards, but a crazy thought runs through her brain that maybe Hatate Himekaidou doesn’t exactly fit the definition of human. “If father had chosen logic over love, maybe he would still be alive, and I would be another star in the sky, alive and dead at the same time, just how I would like it.”

It’s the most she’s spoken in a long time, Kanako can tell, judging by the sound of her voice. Scratchy. Hissy. Above all: dead. Brown eyes vacant, Hatate steps back a few ways until she’s beside Aya once more, still keeping that horrifyingly empty expression on her face. “There is nothing else I know about mother, and what she might have done to dear father. Ask someone else.”

That’s all Kanako needs to hear before she stands up, pushes her chair back, and heads out the house.

Kids these days. No, more accurately: *parents* these days. Thank God Sanae’s my kid, she thinks.

---

“So we have no leads. How fucking lovely,” Suwako drones, throwing her arms up in the air. Kanako shrugs out of her jacket and hangs it on a nearby peg, sitting back down by her desk. Suwako continues; “What in the living hell do we do now? Sit around and Google shit until we get lucky?”

“We could ask Sanae,” Kanako suggests. The blonde’s mouth drops. *Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell her that it was Sana who reopened the case. Oops.*

“She is a *shrine maiden* in training, Kana,” Suwako says, clearly annoyed. “You really think she can help out with a murder case?”

“Well, she did reopen the case and told us about our new favorite dead suspect.”

“She... what?”

Yeah, that’s what she thought, Kanako supposes, as Suwako attempts to make a coherent sentence but fails as her voice all but dies down to a gurgling noise.

A few more minutes later, after a demanded explanation from the police officer, Suwako is back on her computer, typing furiously in the Google search engine. “I can’t believe this. I cannot, literally, *believe* this.” She almost wrenches out the Enter key from her pure rage. Kanako flinches as the loud *click* sound echoes in the office. “Fine. Whatever. Our daughter has mad detective skills and she should probably get a job here instead, but *right now*, our main priority is to get this stupid case out of the way.”

“We have no leads, or clues, except for maybe that Hatate kid’s testimony that Mother Himekaidou really is the one who killed Shameimaru.”

“We have established that,” Suwako hisses through gritted teeth. She mashes the Page Down button furiously. “Can you take a look at the evidence, then, Kana? I think the two sisters brought some stuff back, could be useful.”

“Alright. Try not to pull out too many of those keys.” She leaves the office to the sound of Suwako’s enraged yelling and the painful noises of a fist against the spacebar.

In the evidence room, the two Aki sisters are supposedly guarding it, which is to say they’re poking around various items and chatting animatedly to themselves such as who asked who out and who dumped who. Of course, once Kanako enters the room, they quickly clam up and cower in one corner of the room. Shizuha mutters something to Minoriko, and the younger sister hides a smile. One glare turns that smile into a quiet yelp.

“Suwako said new evidence recently arrived?”

Minoriko jumps. “Y-Yes, ma’am! In Mrs. Himekaidou’s bed, we found, u-um...”

“A pair o’ scissors,” Shizuha finishes, crossing her arms and trying to uphold a tough front. “It looks pretty clean, but it makes no sense to have some scissors in between mattresses, right?”

Kanako grunts and leaves it at that. She ignores the fuming Shizuha at the corner of her eye as she moves towards the edge of the table, where new evidence is usually placed. Indeed, it *is* a pair of scissors, dark violet with still-sharp gleaming blades. It makes no sense why the thing would still be in tip-top shape, especially since most items between mattresses would typically be forgotten and left to rot until they turned into tsukomogami or some other child’s tale, but this thing seemed to be cared for... however one can care for a pair of scissors, anyway.

She picks it up and holds it up close, peering at it intently. There’s something *off* about this pair of scissors. It doesn’t look like it had been used very recently, seeing as it had been squished between mattresses, but...

*... killed in his flat by a pair of scissors, which were taken out as soon as the police turned their backs...*

“No way,” Kanako breathes. The scissor blades are gleaming and bright white, as if they’ve never been used, never cut or stabbed, never been plunged into a man’s throat and used to rip out veins and arteries...

She shoves the scissors towards the two sisters, who jump in surprise. (And this time, it’s not like she can seriously call them cowards, because she’s a hot-blooded woman holding a sharp object, hello.) “Do a forensic analysis on this *right now* . Make it fast or I’ll use these to go snip-snap on your arms, for God’s sake.”

“R-Right away!” Minoriko squeaks, taking the scissors into her shaking hands and nearly dropping it twice on the tiled floor. Shizuha

ushers her sister out of the evidence room and slams the door shut behind them.

Kanako pinches the bridge of her nose, closes her eyes, and counts one to ten. This *fucking* murder case. She still doesn't see what Sanae likes so much about detective work.

---

Why had she done that? Oh, God, why had she *done* that? What had gotten into her?

They're back in Hatate's room again, with the brunette seemingly back to normal, shaking and shivering and overall distressed over her previous actions. *God, what had that been? Why the hell did I do that? How the hell did I do that?*

"Hata?"

Oh, God, no, please, *anyone* but Aya -

"Hatate, it's... yeah, no, it's not okay. But you just have to... to calm down. Take a minute to breathe. Just... Just be still and... and talk to me," the reporter murmurs, tapping their foreheads together as a rough hand delicately traces the brunette's jaw line. It makes Hatate shiver, but for a different reason this time.

But she does do as Aya says, does her best to stop her cowardly trembling, takes deep breaths and shakily lets them back out. She doesn't know if it's *working*, exactly, but she is calming down some, her shivers dying down until only her chest is moving, in, out, in, out.

"You okay now?" Aya asks, voice barely more than a whisper. Hatate musters up the strength for a weak nod, groping around blindly to grab Aya's free hand and grip it tightly. It's like her lifeline now, her only salvation, her last hope to keep going on. And damn if it isn't working. She feels a smile on the reporter's face as she says, "That's good. I... I'm sorry it didn't work out like how we planned it, me getting questions and you giving answers, but..."

It's not like it would have worked out any other way, no matter what you might have done, Hatate thinks, just to fill up the empty space in Aya's trailing words. The brunette sighs, the sound tremendous in the now-silent room, as Aya grips her hand one last time and pulls away.

(Hatate almost wants to pull her back, but remembers that she's already in the darkest bottom of the pit, and there's no helping her now.)

"That cutter over there," Aya whispers. "Why is it..."

The brunette pauses, before she takes off the gloves on her arms and unravels the stained bandages under it, nearly wrenching them off with how disgusting she feels. And there are cuts - shallow but long ones, twisting and curving every which way, designed to look like a tattoo of her failures. She's cut before, but it's never actually been this sort of way, like the waving wind and the swirling seas crashing together to form a haphazard arrangement of pain.

She can hear Aya's stifled gasp, can feel the reporter's touch drifting over the entirety of her shame. Hatate can hear the soft murmur of Aya's voice, "Hatate", and she feels so *tired*. She just wants to sleep, to lean against Aya and never ever have to worry about anything ever again. But the cuts will remain, the scars will not heal, and they will be there to remind her of her existence in this accursed world.

It hurts, she thinks, almost absentmindedly, and it's not going to get better, but I think I would like to rest for now.

---

The next day is a whirlwind of activities.

When Aya gets back to school, Nitori's jumping over her in both excitement and anxiety bunched up in one, asking questions in rapid-fire like her mouth is a machine gun. Momiji intercepts before the blue-haired girl goes wild and starts foaming at the mouth.



“We heard Hatate’s mother... died,” Momiji starts, and Aya’s confused expression drops to be replaced by a scowl.

“Where... Who did you hear that from?”

“We got Sanae to tell us under the condition that we don’t talk about it to anyone else.” She frowns. “We haven’t, don’t worry. But... is it true?”

“... Yeah,” Aya says, to which her voice drops down to a whisper. “Suicide. Apparently, it’s connected to a murder case, but I don’t know much about it, so don’t bother asking me. Plus, it probably isn’t safe to talk about something like this in, well, school...”

“Good point.” Momiji sighs, before leading Nitori away, the pigtailed student still flailing about and her aqua eyes wide in shock. As soon as the two figures turn the corner and disappear from Aya’s sight, the reporter sighs and leans against a wall to steady herself. God, these events were taking a toll on her, especially since her grades have been dropping and she hasn’t had much time to write many articles for the October issue. Thankfully, there was still a number of days until the distribution date, but with Hatate clearly out of commission for the time being...

Well, she’s done it by herself time and time again. What’s another month alone going to change?

---

Rikako looks over the pair of scissors one last time before handing it back to the waiting Kanako. Goodness, that woman has never been able to be at least somewhat patient. “It’s old, *ridiculously* old, and I can’t see why it hasn’t at least rusted a little yet. A curious case if ever I’ve seen one, especially since there’s the faintest hint of blood on it.”

“Blood?” Kanako all but blurts out, eyes wide. “You’re serious. Blood. Whose blood?”

“I’m not sure myself.” Her violet eyes narrow behind glinting glasses. “It’s old enough that the blood has all but disappeared, leaving only the faintest inkling, so there could be a number of suspects. Want me to keep it for a little longer and investigate more?”

“No, wait, here-” Kanako fumbles with the scissors a bit, before handing it back to the scientist and forming her words into a coherent sentence. *Dear me, what’s gotten into her? Is this case with the scissors really so important?* “Try to see if the blood matches this man. Soichiro Shameimaru. If not, see if it’s Hilda Himekaidou’s, or any other person related to her.”

“It’ll be done.” Rikako takes the scissors back and places it next to her laptop, before pushing her glasses up her nose and sighing. She hasn’t gotten much sleep lately - there’ve been a number of cases that she has to investigate an item or seven, and so it’s been a little troublesome. At least she’s got Rika to help.

Kanako looks the scientist over with scouring eyes. “What about you take a look at those scissors and see if they match the blood, report back to me, then take a few days off? You’ve been investigating stuff with Sanae as well, haven’t you?”

... Ah. How had she known that? “I... might have. It’s just, it’s not like I can say no to her-”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Hurry up with your job and your relaxing time speeds up.” Then the police officer walks away, back to her wife’s office.

Rikako picks up the scissors, looks them over, and sighs. Maybe she can stick with this job a little longer.

---

Cuts heal over time. But some scars stay.

Hatate drags herself over next to the trash can, where it’s still filled with scraps of paper, many torn and crumpled and folded, and also

where the bloodied cutter lies.

She picks it up and draws a line at the edge of her wrist, before throwing it away in the trash can, amongst the mounds of paper. Right where it belongs.

She's been doing nothing but lying around in her bed and thinking for so very long, and all her thoughts lead to one thing - the question of why. Of course, there are a number of questions within the *why* : why does my mother have to be a suspect? Why does my father have to be dead? Why does it have to be *me* with the dysfunctional family, or lack thereof? Why do I have to live this way, with claws dripping shadows on the floor and a hideous self that I can't get rid of?

The questions have remained unanswered ever since she thought of them.

She tries. Oh, how *hard* she tries. She tries to calm herself down, to stop her thoughts from running amok, to remember Aya and how her presence is the best thing she can ask for. But she *can't*, because the scars that run over her arms, up and down and left and right, keep reminding her of who she is and why. She wishes she hadn't done it, wishes she hadn't grabbed the cutter from her drawer in a fit of rage and dug the blade deep into her flesh and wished it would pierce something vital, wishes she hadn't dragged it lightly across her neck and almost stabbed herself right then and there.

How she *wishes* .

God, what is she even - what is she even *good* for? The only thing she actually knows how to do *right* is writing for a newspaper nobody actually reads, and-

Her breath hitches.

Her *hacking* .

The days spent in her room solitarily scrolling through the Internet hadn't been wasted - years and years spent learning how to dig deep through the codes buried behind bright and flashy screens, learning how to extract lines of letters and numbers that wouldn't make sense to anyone else, learning how to manipulate them to do exactly as she wants them to. Learning.

How could she have *forgotten*?

The yellow-checkered phone is in her hands in an instant, calligraphy brush dangling from it as she boots it up and allows her fingers to fly across the screen, intent on causing pure, absolute destruction. There's nothing else she's good for. So why bother being good for something if all she can do is break things?

And that's why she is going to dismantle websites everywhere, one by one, just to vent. She can't be bothered to think straight by this point; she just wants to watch the world *burn*, wants to watch entire universes fall apart by her hands in a simple flip-phone that everyone insists is out-of-date. Screw them. Screw this.

The only thing that exists now is the cyber network, Hatate Himekaidou, and her keyboard.

Break it to pieces. Take them apart. She'll see it through until she can make sure her horrid, horrid emotions have faded away. It's what she's always done before, when her mother screams and yells and shrieks at her - but now she's dead, and she's doing it for that. She's doing it for mother.

She's done this millions of times, destroying coded galaxies with sharp fingers. What's another time to everything else?

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It's ten in the evening when the news arrives, and eleven when they finally get everything sorted out.

“Let’s arrange this nice and slowly,” Suwako says, evidently still a little peeved at the thought of Sanae and detective in the same sentence. “Alright. So. Soichiro Shameimaru lived in Japan, married Makiko Shameimaru and had a kid they named Aya. About a few months after that, Soichiro flew to America on a business trip, but fell in love with Hilda Himekaidou. I think these documents are fake, they don’t exactly look legit, so I’m gonna guess it was something like a one night stand. Anyway, that’s where the trail stops. I can’t find anything else.” She glances over at Kanako, who’s sitting beside her and listening intently. “Fill in the gaps with what you’ve found out.”

Kanako clears her throat. “Fine. From the murder scene, Soichiro was killed in his flat by a pair of scissors that disappeared when no one was looking. Maybe about a month after that, Hilda moved to Japan for some reason. Her kid, that Hatate girl, was born on March 14, 1997, and from what I can gather, Hilda moved to Japan at around September 1996, eight or so months before Hatate was born, and since Soichiro was killed at August 1996, a month before that, we can probably assume that Hilda was pregnant with Hatate at around the same time Soichiro was killed.

“Then we found this.” She holds up the pair of scissors, glinting unnaturally in the dim office light. “Asakura ran a forensic analysis on this and found hints of blood long washed away. She compared it to the blood of Soichiro Shameimaru’s, and it was a near-perfect match. As I said, Soichiro was killed by a pair of scissors that were taken away as soon as the police turned their backs, and we found these scissors in between Hilda’s mattresses. Also, in her note, she mentioned that she committed suicide due to Hatate’s father having ‘caught up to her’ or something. That probably means she had been close to insanity to start thinking that Soichiro’s ghost was haunting her, which drove her to suicide.

“In addition to that, we have Hatate Himekaidou’s testimony that it’s likely that Hilda killed Soichiro, for a reason we won’t be able to find out. Makiko and Aya Shameimaru also said that he, Soichiro, had somehow disappeared during his business trip and never returned

despite having said that he was to return in two months' time, and that had clearly never happened for obvious reasons."

After a slight pause, the blonde sighs and leans back heavily into her chair, eyes narrowed - or are they just heavily-lidded? Either way, she looks more tired than Kanako's ever seen her, and the police officer doesn't like it. "In conclusion, it's likely that Hilda Himekaidou killed Soichiro Shameimaru at the same time she was pregnant with Hatate. She was also probably the one who nicked the murder weapon when no one was looking, cleaned it until it fucking sparkled, but never threw it away for some demented reason. And because she didn't want the police to find her, she moved to Japan, where Soichiro lived, and raised her kid there. Judging by her note and her kid's mannerisms, it's safe to assume that she verbally assaulted Hatate due to bad anger management and the guilt of her murder."

Suwako closes the window and turns her laptop off, closing it once the screen goes dark. Then she sighs a very big, very tired sigh. "I'm exhausted and I'm in kind of a bad mood. Can we get some ice cream before we close the case?"

Kanako smiles, this one out of actual, genuine happiness rather than the crazed one she sometimes wears during particularly sadistic interrogations. It's what Suwako does to her sometimes. "Whatever you say. We should get some for Sanae too, don't you think?"

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aokigahara is a forest in japan infamous for several people having died/committed suicide there

hatate's birthday is on march 14 because double spoiler was released then (im trash)

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